

Scepticism and Anti-Scepticism in Medieval Jewish Philosophy and Thought

Studies and Texts in Scepticism

Edited on behalf of
the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies
by Giuseppe Veltri
in Cooperation with Rachel Aumiller

Editorial Board

Heidrun Eichner, Talya Fishman, Racheli Haliva,
Henrik Lagerlund, Reimund Leicht, Stephan Schmid,
Carsten Wilke, Irene Zwiep

Volume 5

Scepticism and Anti-Scepticism in Medieval Jewish Philosophy and Thought

Edited by
Racheli Haliva

DE GRUYTER

The series Studies and Texts in Scepticism is published
on behalf of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies



ISBN 978-3-11-055168-6
e-ISBN (PDF) 978-3-11-055332-1
e-ISBN (EPUB) 978-3-11-055291-1
ISSN 2568-9614



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial NoDerivatives 4.0 License. For details go to <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018947831

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

© 2018 Racheli Haliva, published by Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston

The book is published with open access at www.degruyter.com.

Typesetting: Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.

Printing and binding: CPI books GmbH, Leck

Cover image: Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg, Ms Cod. Levy 115, fol. 158r: Maimonides, More Nevukhim, Beginn von Teil III

www.degruyter.com

To Aba and Ima
Eliyahu and Simi Haliva
whose wisdom, generosity, love, and kindness have always inspired me

Contents

Introduction — 1

Howard Kreisel

Between Philosophic Optimism and Fideistic Scepticism: An Overview of Medieval Jewish Philosophy — 7

Ariel Malachi

Scepticism at the Service of Revelation? Preliminary Observations on Logic and Epistemology in Judah Halevi's *Kuzari* — 23

Dov Schwartz

The Passion for Metaphysics in Maimonides' Thought — 41

Lawrence Kaplan

The Purpose of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides' Theory of Parables, and Sceptical versus Dogmatic Readings of the *Guide* — 67

Charles H. Manekin

Scepticism and Anti-Scepticism: The Case of Maimonides — 86

David Lemler

The Sceptical Exegesis of Maimonides and His Followers — 107

Racheli Haliva

The Origin of the World – An Anti-Sceptical Approach in Medieval Jewish Averroism — 130

Yehuda Halper

The Sex Life of a Metaphysical Sceptic: Platonic Themes in Gersonides' *Commentary on Song of Songs* — 146

Warren Zev Harvey

Maimonides, Crescas, and the Parable of the Castle — 167

Index — 177

Introduction

When I arrived in Hamburg in December 2015, I was asked by the director of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies – Jewish Scepticism (MCAS-JS), Prof. Giuseppe Veltri, to actualize one of MCAS-JS projects – a program that would allow scholars from MCAS-JS and from other universities to focus on scepticism and anti-scepticism in the Middle Ages. The reason behind this request, so I learned a few weeks later, was to explore the phenomenon of scepticism and/or anti-scepticism in Medieval Jewish thought, a phenomenon which is somewhat neglected in the history of scepticism. This is not to say that Jewish thinkers in the Middle Ages failed to write on the topic, but rather that in modern scholarship we rarely find systematic research, similar to that which we find in antiquity, that poses arguments for and against scepticism.

In order to advance this discussion, I contacted several scholars who, to my great surprise, immediately accepted the invitation to come to Hamburg and re-think several aspects of their research within a sceptical and/or anti-sceptical framework. This was not an easy task. Among the common questions were: “what exactly do we mean by scepticism? Is it a philosophical concept discussed in the Academy or in the Pyrrhonian school? Is it connected also to the term *safeq*, doubt, which is usually applied to halakhic issues?” I must confess that I did not have a clear response to these sorts of questions. Therefore, instead of providing a narrow definition of what scepticism is within Jewish thought, I asked the participants to clarify what the term means in their field of study.

MCAS-JS aims to advance research, mainly focusing on Jewish scepticism and anti-scepticism in relation to several contexts, in particular, but not exclusively, to general philosophy, halakhic, midrashic, and Kabbalistic contexts. The current volume is the outcome of a lecture series held at MCAS-JS from November 2016 until February 2017.

In order to give the reader a general view of the content of the articles presented in the book, I shall briefly summarise each contribution:

Howard Kreisel of Ben Gurion University examines the relationship between philosophic optimism and fideistic scepticism. In his article, Kreisel shows that the philosophical tradition that penetrated Jewish thought was essentially an optimistic one grounded primarily in the Arabic translations of the writings of Plato, Aristotle and the Neoplatonic philosophy of Plotinus. The Jewish thinkers, following in the footsteps of the Islamic ones, essentially believed that the intellect was capable of apprehending the most fundamental truths regarding God and the structure of the world, whether these truths are attained by way of logical syllogism in the tradition of Aristotle or by way of the illumination of the intellect in the tradition of Plotinus. This optimism can already be detected among the Islamic theologians (*Kalām*) and it influenced Saadiah Gaon. Philosophic optimism also characterises the Islamic philosophers, beginning with Al-Kindi, and in the Jewish world, beginning with Isaac Israeli, Saadiah's older contemporary. Subsequently, the Jewish philosophical tradition in Andalusia, particularly the

philosophy of Solomon Ibn Gabirol, gives expression to this optimism. In later periods, philosophic optimism characterises the Jewish philosophers of Provence (thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries), whose most important exponent was Gersonides, as well as most of the Jewish philosophers of Spain up to the expulsion in 1492.

The most distinct example of philosophical scepticism in medieval Jewish philosophy can be found in the thought of Judah Halevi, whose thought may have been inspired by Al-Ghazālī. Yet in his case, as in the case of Al-Ghazālī, scepticism was invoked in order to defend religious doctrines and the truths of revelation (what some scholars have termed “fideistic scepticism”). In later periods, the use of scepticism was often still tied to the defence of religion, and explicitly did not question all forms of knowledge, most notably knowledge attained through revelation. Kreisel concludes with the problem of how to interpret Maimonides on this issue. Maimonides’ approach to the ability of philosophy to discover fundamental truths, while at times stressing its severe limitations in the area of metaphysics and even natural philosophy, has led to widely divergent interpretations of his thought. Maimonides was a qualified optimist in his philosophical approach, and some of his more radical sceptical statements regarding the limitations of philosophical knowledge may have served a religious purpose.

Ariel Malachi of Bar-Ilan University dives deeper into scepticism of the twelfth century. His article focuses on scepticism in Judah Halevi’s thought, in particular Halevi’s logical and epistemological aspects. According to Malachi, many scholars have acknowledged the importance of Judah Halevi’s criticism of philosophy. Some of them even pointed to Halevi’s use of philosophical tools to establish his criticism, in a way that might be regarded as a sceptical approach to philosophy. Nevertheless, the general impression from scholarly studies is that the criticism of philosophy is merely a secondary goal for the main goal of the *Kuzari*, namely proposing revelation as an alternative to philosophy, and accepting revelation in a very unsceptical manner. Perhaps that is the reason those scholars did not tend to analyse Halevi’s criticism of philosophy systematically. Malachi seeks to identify the principles of Halevi’s criticism of philosophy and argues that the criticism of philosophy represents a sceptical approach based on logical and epistemological principles of Aristotelian logic. He further argues that this sceptical approach is used not only to criticise philosophy, but also to establish revelation as a valid source of knowledge. Malachi concludes that for Halevi, revelation can be a legitimate possibility within the philosophical domain, but that in his sceptical approach, revelation is superior to other philosophical possibilities.

Several contributors to the current volume concentrate on exploring the sceptical elements and motifs in Maimonides thought:

Dov Schwartz of Bar-Ilan University examines the passion for metaphysical knowledge in Maimonides’ thought, mainly as expressed in the ‘Guide of the Perplexed’

1:31–35. According to Schwartz, several scholars have expressed their views on the nature of Maimonidean rationalism. For the most part, rationalism is judged by its ends: rational conjunction or, according to the agnostic criticism, its absence; the immortality of the intellect, and the like. It is also gauged in relation to the sciences and their acquisition as a religious value. Others viewed the hub of Maimonidean rationalism in the intersection of Aristotelian and Neoplatonic scientific conceptions and the Bible, that is, rationalist interpretation of Scripture and *Aggadah*. A passage in the *Guide of the Perplexed* (1:31–35) turns the focus of Maimonidean rationalism into a psychological principle. Everything is overshadowed by the psychological determination that the will to know the primal and the cosmic is inherent in human nature. Maimonides emphasises that even the multitudes seek universal knowledge and the source of all being, the structure of the psyche, and so forth. Moreover, the quest for knowledge is instinctive, and is characteristic of man as such.

The sexual motif concealed in the unit's discourse as a whole is expressed in the passion to know. Maimonides' use of sexuality is meant, from the outset, to highlight the negative, the harm to be expected. The use of this motif suggests that the passion for knowledge is almost as uncontrollable as the sexual act. And this is why the risk of the passion for knowledge is so great. Maimonides views the sexual urge as man's great nadir. The "sense of touch" is perceived as a disgrace. But it is specifically that sense that enables us to describe the fundamental passion for metaphysics, that is, the quest for knowledge of the most sublime sort. There is a sort of circularity here, in which the highest and lowest points meet.

Lawrence J. Kaplan of McGill University challenges previous scholarly studies regarding Maimonides' Theory of Parables and proposes to examine a sceptical versus dogmatic readings of the *Guide*. The fundamental question Kaplan faces is whether there is a connection between Maimonides' theory of parables in the *Guide* and a sceptical reading of the work.

Maimonides characterises parables as possessing either an external meaning (Arabic: *ẓāhir*) or an internal meaning (Arabic: *bāṭin*). In the *Guide*'s introduction however, Maimonides seems to contradict himself regarding the value of a parable's external meaning. On the one hand, he states that the parable's *ẓāhir*, per se, is worth nothing – except that the *ẓāhir* serves the paradoxical dual function of first concealing the *bāṭin*, but then pointing to the *bāṭin*, once, that is, one has succeeded in, as it were, "decoding" the *ẓāhir*. On the other hand, he states that the parable's *ẓāhir* does possess intrinsic value, since it "contains wisdom that is useful in many respects, among which is the welfare of human societies."

Kaplan suggests examining this ostensible contradiction by offering two plausible readings of the *Guide*: a sceptical reading and a traditional reading. The traditional approach frames the *Guide* as a bibliocentric work, concerned primarily with the meta-philosophical problem of showing how those parts of the Bible that appear to lack wisdom, do, if read and understood properly, contain it, if in different ways.

Charles H. Manekin of the University of Maryland concentrates on the role of certain and near-certain knowledge in Maimonides' religious philosophy.

In his famous parable of the palace in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides claims that one who has achieved demonstration (to the extent possible) of everything demonstrable, and who has come close to certainty in those matters in which one can only come close to it – draws near to “the ruler”, i.e. God (*Guide*, 3.51). Yet why should the psychological state of certainty be relevant for approaching God? Wouldn't it be more appropriate to emphasise the attainment of knowledge? And why would anything less than demonstrated truths affect this process? These questions are examined by Manekin in light of the importance Maimonides accords to the possession of well-established truths in the rational soul. According to Manekin, one should consider these questions within Maimonides' views on the education of the multitude, the indubitability of the prophetic message, and the necessity of putting deviant philosophers to death. Manekin argues that the possession of well-established or well-grounded truths in the rational soul lies at the heart of Maimonides' project, and that the achievement of rational certainty and near-certainty are among the means for achieving this goal.

David Lemler of the University of Strasbourg concentrates on the sceptical exegesis of Maimonides and his followers. According to Lemler, there is an important difference between Maimonides' thinking in his legal works and in his philosophical compositions. Maimonides might be described as a dogmatist if we consider his *Mishneh Torah*, where he proposes a final and exhaustive codification of the law, without mentioning the diverging views expressed in his Talmudic sources. He also proposes a dogmatic list of compulsory beliefs – the thirteen principles of faith. However, when one turns to the non-legal aspects of the Biblical and rabbinical tradition, Maimonides appears far less assertive. He proposes philosophical and allegorical interpretations of prophetic parables, but often stresses that other interpretations are plausible, and sometimes offers several interpretations of one and the same passage. Maimonides' abandoned project of writing a treatise dedicated to deciphering rabbinical *aggadot* was taken over by post-Maimonidean philosophers, especially in Provence. In their philosophical exegeses of *aggadot*, authors such as Moses Ibn Tibbon or Levi ben Abraham of Villefranche show the same doubts with regards to the possibility of offering a “true” and final interpretation. Lemler proposes to assess what is at stake in this dual epistemic attitude of these philosopher-exegetes and concludes that this attitude reflects an essential aspect of their philosophical practice understood as a Foucauldian “spirituality.”

In my article I examine the topic of the origin of the world in the thought of two Jewish Averroists: Isaac Albalag and Isaac Polqar. The question of the origin of the world was of great interest to many philosophers and theologians. Adopting a position on this issue was crucially important for medieval thinkers of all religions, since it indicated their relation to one of the fundamental principles of their faith.

In this article I present the anti-sceptical approach, offered by Isaac Albalag and Isaac Polqar – two Jewish Averroists of the fourteenth century who lived in northern Spain, to one of the most fundamental questions every religious philosopher has to address: is the world created by God *ex nihilo*, that is from absolute non-existence, as suggested by religious tradition, or, is the world eternal, as argued by Aristotle?

Albalag and Polqar adopted the philosophy of Averroes and considered him to be the best commentator on Aristotle. Their interpretation of Judaism, in light of Averroes' Aristotelianism, was based on the assumption that Judaism and true philosophy must always coincide. These two thinkers provide explanations from philosophical texts, rabbinical sources, and linguistic interpretation of the word *Bereshit*.

Yehuda Halper of Bar-Ilan University focuses on the study of the natural sciences and metaphysics in Gersonides' 'Commentary on the Song of Songs' and its relation to the Platonic view.

Gersonides' "Commentary on the Song of Songs" transforms the celebration of the erotic courtship between Solomon and a young woman into a tale of longing between the material intellect and the acquired intellect. On the whole, the presentation of the "Commentary" is Aristotelian: longing is connected to actualising potential, and the active intellect is acquired through the orderly study of the sciences – beginning with logic, continuing on to mathematics, physics, astronomy, and finally metaphysics. Yet, at the same time, central themes of the "Commentary" are Platonic. Similar to Diotima's description of *eros* in Plato's *Symposium*, the object of desire is never reached in the "Commentary." Indeed, this kind of *eros* comes from "Song of Songs" itself, where the erotic courtship is never consummated in the work. In Gersonides' reading, metaphysics is not grasped by the intellect in the way that mathematics and physics are, since it is not grounded in sensory perception, but in common opinions. Moreover, Gersonides' tale of the material intellect's journey to scientific knowledge is similar in a number of ways to the account of Plato's search for scientific knowledge – and ultimately Plato's lack of solid metaphysical knowledge – in Al-Fārābī's "Philosophy of Plato." Gersonides probably did not read Arabic, but could have read Falaquera's paraphrase of Al-Fārābī's work in *Reshit Hokhmah*, or else Falaquera's own account of a similar journey to philosophy in *Sefer ha-mevagesh*. According to Al-Fārābī and thus Falaquera, Plato's intellectual journey ends with the formation of a city that uses the myth of creation presented in the *Timaeus* as the basis of opinions on which a metaphysics can be built. For Gersonides the Bible, when properly understood, can provide a similar basis of common opinions for grounding metaphysics. Nevertheless, Gersonides himself preferred to study mathematics, physics, and astronomy – sciences he viewed as properly grounded in sensory observation.

Warren Zev Harvey of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem focuses on, perhaps Maimonides' greatest critic in the Middle Ages, Hasdai Crescas and his sceptical approach of Maimonides.

Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* seeks to anchor the Jewish religion in the principles of Aristotelian science and philosophy. Rabbi Hasdai Crescas (c. 1340–1410 or 1411), in his *Or Hashem* ("Light of the Lord") presents a radical critique of Aristotelian physics and metaphysics, and on the basis of this critique he rejects Maimonides' approach. According to Crescas, human reason can prove the existence of a first cause, but cannot prove God's unity or goodness, that is, it cannot prove the God of the Bible. Religion, he argues, is based on prophecy not philosophy. In this article Harvey examines Crescas' critique of Maimonides by analysing the midrash of the parable of the castle and pointing to the two different types of scepticism adopted by Crescas and Maimonides.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank first and foremost Prof. Giuseppe Veltri who encouraged me to initiate the lecture series and bring its results to publication. I am also very thankful to Maria Wazinski, MCAS scientific coordinator and Karolin Berends, MCAS project manager who contributed to the success of the lecture series.

This is the appropriate place to thank the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (German Research Foundation) for the generous financial support that made the creation of MCAS possible. I wish to thank the President of the University of Hamburg, Professor Dieter Lenzen, the Chancellor of the University, Dr. Martin Hecht, the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, Professor Oliver Huck, and all members of the University of Hamburg who facilitated the creation of our Centre, for their enthusiasm and professional support in building our 'sceptical enterprise.'

Last but not the least, I wish to thank all speakers who took part in the lecture series and enthusiastically contributed to the publication of the current book. I can only hope that this collected volume advanced the interest of scepticism and anti-scepticism in medieval Jewish philosophy and thought.

Racheli Haliva
Hamburg, June 2018

Howard Kreisel

Between Philosophic Optimism and Fideistic Scepticism: An Overview of Medieval Jewish Philosophy

In the introduction to his *magnum opus*, *The Wars of the Lord*, the early fourteenth century Jewish Provencal philosopher, scientist, and biblical exegete Gersonides writes as follows in regard to the difficult questions he addresses in his treatise: “We recognize that there are many reasons why it might seem proper to refrain from examining these questions.”¹ He then lists these reasons. The third reason he brings is particularly poignant for our discussion:

Third, I think that because of envy, which shall never disappear, some will attribute to me arrogance and rashness in investigating the question of the eternity or creation of the world. For perhaps they think that the intellect of a sage cannot reach the truth on this topic, except if he is a prophet; all the more so when they have seen that earlier scholars of stature from our nation have not investigated this question in the way [that we propose]. From this they have concluded the impossibility of arriving at the truth on this question by means of philosophy. For if this were possible [they say], it would not have escaped the earlier sages.²

Gersonides responds with a lengthy rebuttal of this argument:

Now this argument is very weak. It does not follow that what was not known by the former sages will also not be known by their successors. For in time the truth will be forthcoming, as Aristotle says in book two of the *Physics*. Were this not so, a man would not investigate any science, but only accept what others have taught him. But if this were the case, there wouldn't be any science at all – which is utterly absurd.³

Gersonides is a strong believer in the possibility of progress in solving weighty philosophical questions. Furthermore, he erases the line between prophet and sage, that is to say knowledge based on revelation and knowledge based on reason, when it comes to these questions, since the prophet attains his knowledge of speculative matters

1 Levi ben Gershom, *The Wars of the Lord*, vol. 1, trans. Seymour Feldman (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1984), 93 [with some emendations on my part of the translation]. For a recent study of Gersonides' thought see Seymour Feldman, *Gersonides: Judaism Within the Limits of Reason* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010).

2 *The Wars of the Lord*, 94.

3 *The Wars of the Lord*, 94.

Note: I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this article for their criticisms and suggestions.

in his capacity as sage.⁴ Gersonides concludes this argument with the following observation:

If someone objects that perhaps this doctrine [namely, creation] is one that cannot be philosophically demonstrated, we reply that until a proof is forthcoming that shows the impossibility of such a philosophical demonstration, this is not a valid objection against us. Nor is that which Maimonides pronounced concerning the impossibility of [demonstrated] knowledge on this topic a valid criticism, unless the absurdity of what we shall affirm with respect to one of the possible alternatives on this question will have been demonstrated, as has been mentioned. Indeed it can be shown in several ways that the philosophical verification of this doctrine is possible. For we find among the community of philosophers throughout the ages a natural desire to attain the truth on this question, as Aristotle and Maimonides have both related. [Indeed], we ourselves have perceived [this desire] in the accounts of all the inquirers [on this topic] that have reached us. Now a natural desire cannot be for something that is unattainable, all the more so if it is unattainable by any investigation. In conclusion, the aforementioned arguments do not preclude completing our investigation of this topic as best we can. For human perfection is completed when one knows reality as much as one can, and it is greater in knowing the more superior things than in knowing the things of inferior rank and value.⁵

Gersonides essentially completes here the thought Aristotle voices in the opening of his *Metaphysics*: “All men by nature desire to know,”⁶ by arguing that nature, meaning God, does nothing in vain,⁷ and hence all natural desires are in principle for something that can be attained.⁸ There is a tremendous optimism in Gersonides’ approach to human intellection, a belief in scientific and philosophic progress. It is an optimism that is subtly anchored in the theological belief in God’s wisdom and goodness. Gersonides is convinced that the perfection of the intellect is the true perfection of the human being, hence God must have also provided the human being

⁴ For an analysis of Gersonides’ approach to prophecy see Howard Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 316–424.

⁵ *Wars of the Lord*, 96.

⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book 1.1, 980a22.

⁷ The notion that nature does nothing in vain is inherent in Aristotle’s philosophy and is voiced by him in *On the Heavens*, Book 1.4, 271a33, and in *Parts of Animals*, Book 4.13, 695b19. Maimonides brings this notion in the name of Aristotle in *Guide of the Perplexed* 2, 14, and Gersonides mentions it in *Wars of the Lord* 1, 4; 5, 3, 6.

⁸ Maimonides had voiced the other side of this idea when he argued in *Guide of the Perplexed* 1, 31 that for what is impossible for the human being to apprehend, “he will not find that his soul longs for knowledge of them.” (trans. Pines [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963], 65). His position in the same chapter on whether all things that the human being longs to know are within his grasp to attain, however, is not without ambiguity. He is explicit on the point that on many of these matters it is impossible for human beings to arrive at conclusions that can be proven demonstratively. This still leaves open the question on the epistemological status of non-demonstrative proofs, a point to which I will return later on.

with the capacity to attain this perfection.⁹ Moreover, Gersonides does not believe that revelation provides privileged information in the domain of speculative knowledge that in principle is closed to rational discourse. When it comes to weighty philosophical-theological issues, he does not regard himself as a dwarf sitting on the shoulders of previous giants, a metaphor which was often used as a justification for the belief in scientific progress despite the traditional belief in the superior stature of the ancients¹⁰; Gersonides clearly sees himself as a giant in his own right.

While the explicitness and extent of Gersonides' optimism in philosophic and scientific progress is perhaps atypical of his Jewish philosophic contemporaries – most of them were prone to pay at least the customary lip service to the special nature of prophetic knowledge or to the intellectual superiority of the forefathers – his basic stance is in fact characteristic of Provencal Jewish philosophy.¹¹ Nor is he the only one who accords the prophet no essential superiority over the philosopher in speculative matters. His contemporary, Nissim of Marseilles is even more outspoken in this matter. He argues that the public leadership role that the prophet assumes detracts from his ability to continue to rise on the ladder of knowledge, an impediment that the philosophic sage does not have to overcome in his quest for knowledge.¹²

It should be pointed out, however, that there are limits to Gersonides' philosophic optimism. He rejects the possibility of reaching a level of knowledge whereby one experiences ontological conjunction with the Active Intellect,¹³ a possibility that most of his philosophic contemporaries continued to accept. It also should be noted that he does not feel that he has solved the issue of creation with demonstrative arguments, only with dialectical ones, as is true of the other issues with which he deals in his treatise. Yet this fact in itself does not in any manner mitigate his philosophic optimism

⁹ This is certainly not to argue that there are no limits to the human capacity to know in Gersonides' thought, or that all human beings share the same capacity: see below, n. 13.

¹⁰ On the attitude of medieval Jewish thinkers to the wisdom of the ancients see Abraham Melamed, *On the Shoulders of Giants: The Debate between Moderns and Ancients in Medieval and Renaissance Jewish Thought* [Hebrew] (Ramat-Gat: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2003), esp. 140–153.

¹¹ For a study of the relationship between prophet and sage in the philosophy of Maimonides and his followers in Provence see Howard Kreisel, *Judaism as Philosophy: Studies in Maimonides and the Medieval Jewish Philosophers of Provence* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2015), 270–314.

¹² Kreisel, 307–310. This argument was previously already made by Samuel Ibn Tibbon in his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, where he criticizes Maimonides' view on this issue; see Aviezer Ravitzky, "The Political Role of the Philosopher: Samuel Ibn Tibbon Versus Maimonides," *Maimonides Studies* 5 (2008): 345–374. Levi ben Avraham in his *Livyat Hen* also presents this position; see Kreisel, *Judaism as Philosophy*, 300.

¹³ See Seymour Feldman, "Gersonides on Possibility of Conjunction with the Agent Intellect," *AJS Review* 3 (1978): 99–120. In denying the possibility of ontological union with the Active Intellect, due to the limits he places on the human capacity to know, Gersonides does not negate the possibility of immortality. Rather he sees the attainment of any intelligible as transforming the potential intellect into an immortal intellect, with the eternal felicity enjoyed by this intellect being dependent upon the extent and depth of its apprehension of the intelligibles.

regarding the human being's ability to solve weighty scientific and metaphysical problems relating to God and the structure of the world. Moreover, Gersonides sees dialectical arguments, when framed according to the methodology he lays down, as leading to almost certain truth, close to that attained by demonstrative arguments.¹⁴

The philosophic optimism displayed by Gersonides is not only true of his philosophic contemporaries in Provence, such as Joseph Kaspi and Nissim of Marseilles, or his predecessors such as Samuel and Moses Ibn Tibbon and Levi ben Avraham. It is certainly true also of many of the subsequent generations of Jewish philosophers in Spain who saw in Maimonides and Averroes their teacher, such as Moses Narboni, Abraham Bibago, and Shem Tov ben Joseph Ibn Shem Tov, and well as earlier Spanish Jewish philosophers such as Isaac Albalag. The only exceptions to this rule, those who adopted a critical stance to philosophic knowledge, are motivated by religious considerations rather than philosophic ones, a point to which I will soon return.

Even Gersonides' philosophic optimism, as well as that of his contemporaries, pales in light of the philosophic optimism of some of the Jewish philosophers in Spain prior to the period of Maimonides. Certainly it is hard to imagine a Jewish philosopher more optimistic in his stance regarding the ability of the human being to grasp metaphysical matters than Solomon Ibn Gabirol, who essentially mirrors the optimism of the great third century philosopher Plotinus. Not only does Gabirol, in his treatise the *Source of Life*, feel that he has understood the most fundamental metaphysical issues, beginning with the nature of God and continuing with the order of emanation and the nature of the human soul¹⁵: At the end of his treatise, he indicates that the knowledge of God that the perfect human being is capable of attaining at the end of the process of intellection results in "deliverance from death and conjunction (*applicatio* in Latin, *devequt* in Hebrew) with the Source of Life," a reference to conjunction with the divine Will, if not with the transcendent God.¹⁶ In this case too, Ibn Gabirol is only atypical in the extent of his optimism – an optimism which appears to posit no

¹⁴ For a discussion of dialectical arguments in Gersonides' thought, see Sara Klein-Braslavy, *Without Any Doubt: Studies in Gersonides' Methods of Inquiry* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 73–115.

¹⁵ For a survey of Ibn Gabirol's philosophy see Jacques Schlanger, *Le philosophie de Salomon Ibn Gabirol* (Leiden: Brill, 1968). For a more recent in-depth study of his thought see Sarah Pessin, *Ibn Gabirol's Theology of Desire: Matter and Method in Jewish Medieval Neoplatonism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

¹⁶ *Source of Life* V. 43. The Arabic original of this treatise has been lost. What has survived is the Latin translation, *Fons Vitae*, ed. Clemens Baumker (Munster, 1892) and the Hebrew paraphrase by Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera, *Meqor Hayyim*, ed. Avraham Zifroni (Tel Aviv: Mahbarot le-Sifrut, 1961). While Alexander Altmann sees the notion of conjunction here as referring to an ontological state, and essentially following in the footsteps of Plotinus, Jacques Schlanger interprets this term as referring to an epistemological state. I favour Altmann's interpretation and discuss this and related passages in Howard Kreisel, "The Place of Man in the Hierarchy of Existence in the Philosophy of Ibn Gabirol and Maimonides," in *Alei Shefer: Studies in the Literature of Jewish Thought*, ed. Moshe Hallamish (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1990), 97–100.

limits in the human being's capacity to attain knowledge – or in the extent and depth of the knowledge which he himself feels he has attained and now wishes to share with his readers. Yet his philosophic optimism is not essentially different from that of the earlier North African Jewish Neoplatonic Philosopher Isaac Israeli,¹⁷ or from the later Andalusian Jewish Neoplatonic philosopher Joseph Ibn Zaddik.¹⁸

The optimistic note that is to characterize Jewish philosophy throughout its history is struck already by Isaac Israeli's contemporary Saadiah Gaon in his pioneering theological treatise, *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, completed in Baghdad in 933. Saadiah opens his treatise with the following benediction:

Blessed be God, the God of Israel, Who is alone deserving of being regarded as the Evident Truth, Who verifies with certainty unto rational beings the existence of their souls, by means of which they assess accurately what they perceive with their senses, and apprehend correctly the objects of their knowledge. Uncertainties are thereby removed from them and doubts disappear, so that demonstrations become lucid for them and proofs become clear. May He be lauded, then, above the highest commendation and praise.¹⁹

Utilizing the arguments of the Islamic theologians, the *mutakallimūn*, Saadiah goes on to prove the creation of the world and the incorporeality of God before turning to other topics, including the nature of the human soul. Saadiah sees reason and revelation as complementing each other. Significantly, he is aware of the position of the sceptics and describes it as follows in the course of discussing all the false opinions regarding the issue of the creation of the world:

The twelfth theory is that of skepticism (Ar. *al-wuqūf*).²⁰ The proponents of this theory are people who maintain that it is proper for man to refrain from believing anything, because they claim that human reasoning is full of uncertainties. We see the truth like a flash of lightning that cannot be held or reached. It behooves us, therefore, to refrain from forming any opinion.²¹

Of this group Saadiah has the following to say: "They are more senseless, however, than even the Sophists, for the latter make the mistake of admitting lies into the company of real truths, whereas the former refrain from both truth and falsehood."²² Saadiah

¹⁷ For a study of Israeli's thought and English translations of some of his writings see Alexander Altmann and Samuel M. Stern, *Isaac Israeli: A Neoplatonic Philosopher of the Early Tenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958).

¹⁸ For a study of Ibn Zaddik's thought see Georges Vajda, "La philosophie et la théologie de Joseph Ibn Zaddik," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge* 24 (1949): 93–181.

¹⁹ Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), 3.

²⁰ Literally meaning: abstention, standing or stopping, as in halting an investigation or inquiry. Judah Ibn Tibbon thus translates the term into Hebrew: *da`at ha-`amidah* while Joseph Kafih translates it: *shitat ha-ḥiddalon*.

²¹ *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* I. 3, 80.

²² *Ibid.*

goes on to offer a series of arguments against this stance, many of them based on the notion that its adherents essentially contradict themselves. For example, the true sceptic cannot even affirm scepticism as the true position without self-contradiction, for in this case he is affirming this position as true rather than adopting a sceptical position regarding it.

The final group attacked by Saadiah in his discussion of creation are the more radical sceptics who not only maintain that one cannot attain certain knowledge by means of reason but also that one cannot attain knowledge even by means of sense perception. Saadiah labels them as those who claim complete ignorance (Ar. *al-mutajāhilin*) and regards them as “more senseless than all those previously mentioned.”²³ I do not know what the sources were for Saadiah’s depiction of these philosophic schools and whether there continued to exist actual members of these schools in tenth century Baghdad where Saadiah lived. In general, Saadiah’s discussion in this section appears to rely on a written source that preserved older views. At any rate, it is instructive that Saadiah regards these two groups as being the most senseless, which means more senseless not only than the Sophists (the eleventh theory) but also the Dualists (the fifth theory), those who believe that the world came about by chance, an apparent reference to the theory of Epicurus (the ninth theory), and those who believe in the eternity of the world (the tenth theory). For Saadiah, to deny the very *possibility* of knowledge in regard to philosophic issues is worse even than being fundamentally mistaken in one’s belief. It should be added that Saadiah’s faith in the human being’s ability to know has primarily a theological underpinning. According to Saadiah, it is a beneficent and wise God, after all, who created human beings with reason, that is to say, the ability to know. To question the very possibility of knowledge is at the same time to disparage God’s creation.²⁴

The list of medieval Jewish philosophers who display an optimistic attitude to the human being’s ability to acquire knowledge, even in the area of metaphysics, encompasses the vast majority of its practitioners, whether they are closer to Neoplatonic or Aristotelian thought. Yet there were also the “naysayers,” that is to say, the critics of human reason and its ability to provide us with certain knowledge in regard to weighty theoretical issues. In the Jewish world, the two most important critics of the conceptual approach of the Aristotelian philosophers, the approach that was regarded in the medieval period as the epitome of reason, are without doubt Judah Halevi in the first half of the twelfth century and Hasdai Crescas at the turn of the fourteenth century, both from Spain. Consider for example Judah Halevi’s following critique of the philosopher’s theory of emanation in *Kuzari* 4.25, which is somewhat reminiscent of Al-Ghazālī’s critique in his *Incoherence of the Philosophers*²⁵:

²³ *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, 82.

²⁴ For Saadiah, everything God does is the product of wisdom and beneficence, starting with the very act of creating the world.

²⁵ See Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. Michael Marmura (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2000), Discussion 3, 67–68. For a comparison between two thinkers see David

People accepted this theory and were deceived by it to such extent, that they looked upon it as conclusive because it was attributed to Greek philosophers. It is, however, a mere assertion without convincing power, and open to various objections. First, for what reason did this emanation cease; did the First become impotent? [Second], it might be asked: Why from Saturn's intellection of what was above did not one thing arise, and from the intellection of the first angel another thing, so that the emanations from Saturn would be four? Whence do we know altogether that in the intellection of itself a sphere necessarily comes about, and from the intellection of the First an angel necessarily come about? When Aristotle asserts that he intellectually cognized himself, one may expect that a sphere should emanate from him; and when he asserts that he intellectually cognized the First, an angel should emanate.²⁶

Halevi subsequently brings a far more detailed critique of the philosophic view (*Kuzari* 5.14) after presenting a synopsis of their philosophy (*Kuzari* 5.12), a synopsis based on a short treatise by Avicenna on the soul. This time around he focuses more on their view of the manner in which sublunar entities are generated and on the nature of the human soul. In both critiques, he stresses the fundamental disagreements between the philosophers regarding all these issues, a point that was critical for the rise of scepticism in the Hellenistic world. As in the case of Al-Ghazālī, he also stresses that reason itself negates their views.

Yet Halevi's philosophic scepticism is hardly a neutral intellectual stance. It comes to defend knowledge based on revelation. While one cannot rely on knowledge of the philosophers, according to Halevi, one can certainly rely on the knowledge attained by the prophets. In short, it is the scepticism of the believer who employs it in defence of religion, or fideistic scepticism. Particularly ironic in Halevi's case is the fact that he himself advanced his own conceptual scheme of the structure of the world as well as ultimate human perfection, a conception that draws upon many of the same philosophic views he critiques, as well as Sufi and Shiite conceptions.²⁷ This conception is far removed from traditional Jewish views on many fundamental points, even though Halevi himself may not have agreed with this characterization of his thought. Furthermore, it is not entirely consistent, and can hardly be said to be more firmly

Baneth, "Judah Halevi and al-Ghazālī," in *Studies in Jewish Thought: An Anthology of German-Jewish Scholarship*, ed. Alfred Jospe (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981): 181–199.

²⁶ Judah Halevi, *The Kuzari*, trans. Hartwig Hirschfeld (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 238–239 [with some emendations on my part of the translation].

²⁷ For Halevi's indebtedness to the philosophic worldview in developing his conceptual scheme see Howard Kreisel, "Judah Halevi's *Kuzari*: Between the God of Abraham and the God of Aristotle," in *Joodse Filosofie tussen rede en traditie: Feestbundel ter ere van de tachtigste verjaardag van Prof. dr. H. J. Heering*, ed. Reinier Munk and F. J. Hoogewoud (Kampen: Kok, 1993), 24–34. For Sufi influences on Halevi see Diana Lobel, *Between Mysticism and Philosophy: Sufi Language of Religious Experience in Judah Halevi's Kuzari* (Albany: State University of New York Press 2000), and for Shiite conceptions see Ehud Krinis, *God's Chosen People: Judah Halevi's Kuzari and the Shī'ī Imām Doctrine* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2014). For the incorporation of Jewish mystical ideas in the *Kuzari* see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Merkavah Traditions in Philosophical Garb: Judah Halevi Reconsidered," *PAAJR* 57 (1990): 179–242.

grounded in reason than the conception of the philosophers. Nevertheless, it serves as an alternate philosophical conception. The reader of the *Kuzari* is not left with a conceptual void following upon the ruins of the Aristotelian conceptual scheme, nor must he resort to a literal understanding of the traditional texts of Judaism with all the conceptual difficulties such a reading entails. Rather, the reader is given a different conceptual picture of the world to replace the Aristotelian one.

The case of Ḥasdai Crescas, the other Jewish Al-Ghazālī, is perhaps even more striking.²⁸ In his *Light of the Lord*, Crescas sets out to destroy the Aristotelian world-view, beginning with the propositions of Aristotelian physics set forth by Maimonides in the beginning of part 2 of the *Guide*, which in turn serve as the foundation for the Aristotelian proofs for the existence of God.²⁹ Like those of Al-Ghazālī, Crescas's arguments are detailed, critical, and rational ones, much more than those presented by Judah Halevi. Yet, as in the case of Halevi, we are hardly left with a philosophic void as we read the treatise. Instead, we are treated to a rationally argued philosophic view that Crescas considers to be more in harmony with both Judaism and reason. From a purely philosophic point of view, some of Crescas's arguments are the most astute of any medieval Jewish philosopher and exerted an important influence on Spinoza's thought.³⁰ Hence in both cases, that of Halevi and that of Crescas, philosophic scepticism is hardly their last word. One philosophic system is undermined in order to make room for a different philosophic system that their authors feel is more in harmony with Judaism, and which at the same time incorporates many ideas from the philosophic system which they reject. Rather than being exceptions to the rule of philosophic optimism shared by the other medieval Jewish philosophers, in a crucial sense they are both exemplars of this rule. To be sure, their conceptions are different in many crucial respects and are presented in far different manners – Halevi's presentation is for the most part non-analytical and more in keeping with Neoplatonic presentations while Crescas's presentation displays a far more rigorous philosophic argumentation reminiscent of medieval Aristotelian philosophy. This point notwithstanding, the thrust and nature of their philosophies share much in common.

So we are left with the question of how Maimonides fits into this picture. Is he a fideistic sceptic who rationally undermines Aristotelian philosophic conceptions when he sees them in fundamental conflict with tradition, as in the case of creation – a conclusion which a straightforward reading of the *Guide of the Perplexed* suggests?³¹

²⁸ For an in-depth survey of Crescas' thought, see Warren Zev Harvey, *Rabbi Hisdai Crescas* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2010).

²⁹ See Harry Wolfson, *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929).

³⁰ See in particular Harry Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, vol. 1 (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 264–295.

³¹ Herbert Davidson is probably the most important contemporary exponent of the approach that rejects an esoteric reading of Maimonides' philosophy. See, for example, his treatment of the *Guide of the Perplexed* in *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 322–402.

Or is he an esoteric writer whose own views, when carefully deciphered, are essentially those of the Aristotelians, as many of his early commentators, such as Samuel Ibn Tibbon, and later commentators, such as Leo Strauss, have maintained?³² Or perhaps he belongs to neither of these camps but rather is in truth a philosophic sceptic, that is to say, one who doubts whether philosophy or the texts based on revelation can provide us with certain knowledge, as some recent scholars have argued?³³ Regarding the last alternative, at first glance it would seem strange, to say the least, for Maimonides to adopt a philosophical sceptical position when none of his predecessors or followers did so. Perhaps after Maimonides we no longer see the unrestrained philosophic optimism of Solomon Ibn Gabirol, and instead see more of an acceptance of the limits of human intellection, particularly in the realm of metaphysics, but this in itself hardly amounts to philosophic pessimism or scepticism. Moreover, none of the medieval Jewish philosophers who were inspired by Maimonides viewed him as a philosophic sceptic. At most, many of them thought that he in fact accorded a special place to prophetic knowledge even in regard to theoretical issues, such as the issue of creation. As for his predecessors, it is not only his Jewish ones that were immensely optimistic of the human being's capacity to know, and, truth be told, Maimonides did not really admire his Jewish philosophic predecessors.³⁴ The non-Jewish philosophers who inspired him, and whom he unabashedly admired, exhibited a tremendously optimistic view: beginning with Aristotle, who was for Maimonides the chief of the philosophers, and continuing with Aristotle's ancient commentators Themistius and Alexander of Aphrodisias, and finally, in the medieval world, Al-Fārābī and Ibn Bajja.³⁵ Although it is true that in his lost commentary on Aristotle's *Ethics*, which was apparently written towards the end of his life, Al-Fārābī adopted a negative position regarding the possibility of conjunction with the Active Intellect and the attainment of immortality,³⁶ in all his other writings his position is one of unbridled optimism.

This is not to say that Davidson sees Maimonides as a fideistic sceptic, though his interpretation of Maimonides is in harmony with such an approach.

32 For a survey of the history of interpretation of Maimonides' *Guide* see Aviezer Ravitzky, "The Secrets of the *Guide of the Perplexed*: Between the Thirteenth and the Twentieth Centuries," in *Studies in Maimonides*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990): 159–207.

33 For a survey of the interpretation of Maimonides as sceptic see Josef Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides' Guide* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 132–190.

34 In one of his letters to his Hebrew translator, Samuel Ibn Tibbon, Maimonides presents his recommended reading list of philosophical literature, while briefly touching upon some of his Jewish predecessors, though for the most part ignoring them. For a recent study of this letter see Doron Forte, "Back to the Sources: Alternative Versions of Maimonides' Letter to Samuel Ibn Tibbon and their Neglected Significance," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 23 (2016): 47–90.

35 As emerges from the Maimonides' letter as well as his citations of these authors in the *Guide*; see Shlomo Pines's introduction, "The Philosophic Sources of *The Guide of the Perplexed*," to his English translation of the *Guide*.

36 Even in this case Al-Fārābī was not really a philosophic sceptic; he rejected outright the possibility of immortality on philosophic grounds. While this commentary is lost, Al-Fārābī's position is noted

We do not know what position he adopted in this lost commentary, if any, in regard to the rest of the earlier philosophical system he developed, which was to exert a decisive influence on subsequent Muslim philosophers such as Ibn Bajja, and on Jewish philosophers, most notably Maimonides.

Having said that, I concede that it is quite evident that Maimonides appears to strike a more pessimistic note in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, or at least a more tentative one, regarding the human being's capacity for knowledge than what one finds in his predecessors or successors, or, for that matter, in his own earlier writings. Nevertheless, I remain critical of the view that Maimonides adopted the sceptical position and that the nature of the esotericism of the *Guide* is of a philosophical kind rather than political-religious.³⁷ The article that pioneered the reading of Maimonides as sceptic is Shlomo Pines's "The Limitations of Human Knowledge according to Al-Fārābī, Ibn Bajja and Maimonides." Pines, based on his reading of a text ascribed to Ibn Bajja, ascribes to Al-Fārābī the view in his lost commentary on Aristotle's *Ethics* that there is no immortality of the intellect and the only happiness to be attained is civic happiness in this life. Pines's hypothesis that Maimonides, who cites in *Guide* 3.18 a different passage from this lost commentary, was strongly influenced by this view; the esoteric message of the *Guide*, on Pines's account, is that all metaphysical knowledge is impossible for humans to attain and political perfection is the ultimate goal of existence. Pines continues by analysing a number of passages in the *Guide* which, in his reading, allude to this position. In short, Pines views Maimonides as a proto-Kantian, and the intent of Maimonides' esotericism was not to signal his agreement with Aristotelian metaphysics but rather his scepticism regarding it, just as Maimonides was sceptical regarding the truths of the Jewish tradition.³⁸ Pines's article invited a strong and direct reaction on the part of Herbert Davidson³⁹ and a roundabout reaction on the part of Alexander Altmann.⁴⁰ Both scholars attempted to show, each in a different and very well-argued manner, that Maimonides, against Pines's reading, continued to accept the possibility of metaphysical knowledge and immortality, a conclusion

by subsequent Islamic authors, such as Ibn Bajja, Ibn Tufayl, and Averroes. The work was also known to Maimonides, which was very important to the argument advanced by Shlomo Pines, cited below, that Maimonides ultimately rejected the possibility of metaphysical knowledge. Recently, some fragments from this commentary in Hebrew translation have been discovered and analysed by Chaim Meir Neria, "Al-Fārābī's Lost Commentary on the Ethics: New Textual Evidence," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 23 (2013): 69–99.

³⁷ Kreisel, *Judaism as Philosophy*, 262–269.

³⁸ Shlomo Pines, "The Limitations of Human Knowledge according to Al-Fārābī, Ibn Bajja, and Maimonides," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979): 82–109.

³⁹ See Herbert Davidson, "Maimonides on Metaphysical Knowledge," *Maimonidean Studies* 3 (1992–1993): 49–103.

⁴⁰ See Alexander Altmann, "Maimonides on the Intellect and the Scope of Metaphysics," in *Von der mittelalterlichen zur modernen Aufklärung* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1987): 60–129.

that was shared by both the “exotericist” and earlier “esotericist” readers of Maimonides alike.

Yet Davidson’s and Altmann’s rejoinders to Pines’s argument hardly put an end to the debate. The notion that Maimonides’ esotericism might be of a different kind than the type that Strauss and his predecessors posited was taken up by Warren Z. Harvey in his Hebrew article: “How Leo Strauss Paralyzed the Study of the *Guide of the Perplexed* in the 20th Century.” Harvey argues contra Strauss that some of the contradictions in the *Guide* resulted from philosophic uncertainty rather than political reasons.⁴¹ Yair Lorberbaum had already developed this new trend in his Hebrew article on the seventh reason for contradictions in the *Guide*. In Lorberbaum’s view, in different discussions, Maimonides bases his ideas on contradictory propositions, attempting to disguise this fact not in order to signal his agreement with Aristotle but to signal that one cannot be certain of either proposition, only to what conclusions each would lead.⁴² Josef Stern has also attempted to advance the interpretation of Maimonides as sceptic, particularly by a close examination of Maimonides’ epistemology in his recent book, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides’ Guide*.

It is not my intent here to analyse any of these well-argued interpretations and to refute the readings of the passages in the *Guide* upon which they are based, which has already been done by some of the opponents of the sceptical approach.⁴³ Yet at

⁴¹ Warren Z. Harvey, “How Leo Strauss Paralyzed the Study of the *Guide of the Perplexed* in the 20th Century [Hebrew],” *Iyyun* 50 (2001): 387–396.

⁴² Yair Lorberbaum, “Maimonides on the Seventh Cause of Contradictions [Hebrew],” *Tarbiz* 69 (2000): 211–237. See also his “On Contradictions, Rationality, Dialectics and Esotericism in Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*,” *Metaphysics* 55 (2002): 711–750.

⁴³ Davidson, for example, in his article “Maimonides on Metaphysical Knowledge,” deals in detail with each of Pines’s readings of the *Guide* and tries to show why they are incorrect. Of particular interest in regard to this issue is the contradictory translations/interpretations of a passage at the end of *Guide* 2.24, a chapter devoted to showing our fundamental uncertainty regarding astronomic matters. Maimonides concludes with a reference to the proof of the existence of God, which, according to Pines, should be translated as follows: “And even the general conclusion that may be drawn from them [the heavens], namely that they prove the existence of their Mover, is a matter the knowledge of which cannot be reached by human intellects (327).” According to this translation Maimonides contradicts his numerous statements in the *Guide* in which he states that the God’s existence, incorporeality and unity are proven demonstratively (see *Guide* 1.9, 18, 36, 51, 55–56, 58–61, 63, 70–72; 2.1–2.2, 13, 19, 25, 33; 3.20, 45) and he thus essentially negates our absolute knowledge of even the most fundamental dictum of metaphysics. However, as Pines notes, Samuel Ibn Tibbon translates the passage into Hebrew in a far different manner, which Pines renders in English: “The general proof from them is that they indicate the existence of their Mover, but the knowledge of other matters concerning them cannot be reached by human intellects.” Most of the translators (and scholars) agree with Ibn Tibbon that Maimonides meant to exclude rather than include the proof of God from matters of which we are ignorant. Most of *Aleph* 8 (2008) is devoted to an in-depth investigation of this chapter and its problematic sentence on the part of many leading Maimonidean scholars, including Herbert Davison, Alfred Ivry, Josef Stern, Gad Freudenthal, Joel Kraemer, Y. Tzvi Langermann and Warren Zev Harvey.

the least they certainly show that one can hardly dismiss a sceptical reading out of hand, despite how singular this position appears to be in the landscape of medieval Jewish philosophy, though almost all of the Jewish philosophers, including Maimonides, acknowledge limits to human apprehension, particularly in the realm of metaphysics. I would like, however, to underscore a number of points that further call into question the sceptical approach.

Maimonides regards most proofs regarding weighty questions pertaining to the astrophysical world as well as to metaphysics as being dialectical proofs, rather than demonstrative (including the proofs for creation).⁴⁴ That is to say, most of these proofs are based on premises which we cannot entertain with absolute certainty but reason judges them to be *probably* true. In the case of all these proofs then, we have to accept their conclusions with a question mark and be prepared to entertain the opposite view if better proofs should arise.⁴⁵ On the other hand, they are the preferred position from the standpoint of the intellect. One assents to the truth of certain propositions, even if this assent is not the same level of assent that one gives to propositions proven by demonstration. I certainly don't see this as being equivalent to a sceptical position, at least in its purer forms, though it does leave room for a sceptical attitude. After all, Maimonides with good reason sees Aristotle himself as adopting this position. It should be noted that there have been far different forms of philosophical scepticism from Antiquity to the present, and, as we have seen from Saadiah's account, scepticism was defined by some as withholding assent to the truth of propositions in all forms of debatable (or non-evident) knowledge, rational and empirical – a position that has been attributed to Pyrrho of Elis (4th–3rd century B.C.E.). Others, such as the Academic sceptics (3rd–1st centuries B.C.E.), as well as some of the Pyrrhonists, tended not to be so far reaching in their sceptical attitude, that is to say what areas of knowledge are not known. The Academic sceptics, however, were more dogmatic on this issue – namely, in certain areas such as metaphysics one must assent to the truth of the proposition that one *cannot* know anything in this area. In their pure form, both of these types of scepticism work along the principle of the excluded middle: either one knows propositions in certain given areas or one does not know them. In the context of Maimonides' thought, this would mean that, regarding all matters upon which we do not have demonstrative proof or we do not grasp as first principles, we do not really know them. Now, when it comes to knowing God's *essence*, Maimonides clearly agrees with the approach of the Academic sceptics – not only do we not know it, but we know that we cannot know it. In other areas in which the issues in question are debatable, Maimonides should then be interpreted as maintaining that we must withhold any assent to the truth of either of the contradictory positions, and this would apply to all metaphysical questions as well as most astronomic. Yet not only

⁴⁴ *Guide* 1.31–1.33; 2.2–2.3, 11, 15, 22–24; 3.51.

⁴⁵ *Guide* 1.32.

does Maimonides appear to accept certain metaphysical views as absolutely certain – the existence, unity, and incorporeality of God, the existence of Separate Intellects including the Active Intellect – as well as a number of astrophysical views, he also attaches much importance to the middle ground: namely, knowledge based on dialectical proofs rather than demonstrative, which we can accept with a relative degree of confidence though not with complete certainty. This includes the basic Aristotelian conceptual view of the world which, he argues, underlies the traditional authoritative texts of Judaism.⁴⁶ It is true that even a number of the sceptics of Antiquity held a similar position regarding the nature of probable truths, such as Carneades (and Cicero), who appear to not be so far from Aristotle's basic view in this matter.⁴⁷ Where Maimonides may be said to be closer to these sceptics than to Aristotle is in his *stress* of the probable, rather than absolute, truth of these propositions, whereas Aristotle tends to leave this distinction to his readers.

I concede that this interpretation raises severe problems regarding Maimonides' apparent acceptance of the immortality of the human intellect. Can the intellect attain immortality on the basis of dialectical rather than demonstrative knowledge? Another critical issue which remains is whether Maimonides accepted a level of knowledge beyond all discursive knowledge, the level of intellectual illumination akin to the one described by Plotinus, and later on by the Islamic mystics and even some of the philosophers. I think Maimonides did, and he equated it with prophetic illumination.⁴⁸ At the same time, he is explicit on the point that prophecy can only be attained after a completion of all scientific-philosophical studies. However, how can discursive knowledge serve as the preparation for attaining such a higher state of knowledge, when it is for the most part dialectical rather than demonstrative, and hence its epistemological status is questionable. This is particularly problematic given the connection between epistemology and ontology in Maimonides' thought, i.e. the identification of the intellect with the object of thought.⁴⁹ Yet the view that Maimonides did not satisfactorily work out all these problems to his own satisfaction, and I don't think he did, does not mean that he became a philosophic sceptic even if he was on occasion philosophically perplexed. He remained committed to the essential principles of the Aristotelian world view, though he realized that it was only partially demonstrative, and certainly many of its details can be shown to be false as

⁴⁶ *Guide* 2.2–2.12.

⁴⁷ For a good overview of the thought of the sceptics of Antiquity see Edwyn Bevan's classic essays in his *Stoics and Sceptics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), 121–152. For a more recent summary see Katja Vogt, "Ancient Skepticism," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skepticism-ancient/>). For a discussion of scepticism in general see Peter Klein, "Skepticism," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skepticism/>). See also the bibliography appended to both of these articles as well as related entries.

⁴⁸ See my discussion in *Judaism as Philosophy*, 274–282.

⁴⁹ Maimonides accepts this principle in *Guide* 1.68.

science makes strides in the areas of mathematics and astronomy, a point which he states explicitly.⁵⁰

Finally, let me note that chapter 24 of part 2, the chapter which perhaps best supports the sceptical interpretation, comes in the context of Maimonides' discussion of the problem of creation. More concisely, it comes at the point where he adduces the argument that one should rely on the position of the greatest of prophets, Moses, as well as that of Abraham, over the position of the Aristotelian philosophers.⁵¹ In short, one should favour revelation over philosophy on the issue of creation. I don't think one can separate the perplexity Maimonides expresses in this chapter from the context and goal of his overall discussion. We may well be dealing here with a case of fideistic scepticism, which is a sceptical position that comes in order to defend religion, at least on the exoteric level.⁵² Yet even in this chapter, shortly after Maimonides speaks of matters that "cannot be reached by human intellects" (327) – referring either to the proof of the existence of God or the proof regarding the true nature of the heavens, depending on how you read the sentence in question⁵³ – Maimonides concludes by noting, "it is possible that someone else may find a demonstration by means of which the true reality of what is obscure for me will become clear to him (327)." This strikes me as the words more of an optimist who believes in the possibility, at least, of scientific-philosophic progress, and who in a crucial sense anticipates future philosophers such as Gersonides, who voice this optimism more explicitly.

50 See *Guide* 2.4. Alfred Ivry in his *Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed: A Philosophical Guide* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2016) has forcefully argued against the reading of Maimonides as sceptic on the one hand, and against the exoteric reading of Maimonides on the other. See in particular 3–6. Ivry sees Maimonides at the same time becoming increasingly more cognizant of the limitations of philosophy and the tentative stance he must adopt to many of its teachings, without, however, necessarily rejecting them. My reading on this issue is very close to that of Ivry.

51 *Guide* 2.23. As one of the anonymous reviewers of this article astutely remarks, Maimonides explicitly describes the argument that one should rely on Abraham and Moses as a rhetorical argument. He goes on to note that Maimonides' position here stands in contrast to *Guide* 1:71, where he writes: "If, however, [creation] is not demonstrated in your opinion, and if you take over from the prophets, through obeying their authority, the doctrine that it was created in time, there is not harm in that." In *Guide* 1:5 and 1:19, Maimonides uses the phrase "there is no harm in it" to denote an inferior, albeit acceptable, view. I would add that it denotes views that Maimonides himself does not accept. One may thus question to what extent Maimonides was personally committed to the position he adopts in *Guide* 2.23.

52 For different approaches to Maimonides' view on the issue of creation see the articles of Kenneth Seeskin and Howard Kreisel and the responses of Roslyn Weiss and Charles H. Manekin in *Jewish Philosophy: Perspectives and Retrospectives*, ed. Raphael Jospe and Dov Schwartz (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2012), 157–232.

53 See above, note 43.

Selected Bibliography

- Al-Ghazālī. *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. Translated by Michael Marmura. Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2000.
- Altmann, Alexander, and Samuel M. Stern. *Isaac Israeli: A Neoplatonic Philosopher of the Early Tenth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958.
- Altmann, Alexander. "Maimonides on the Intellect and the Scope of Metaphysics." In *Von der mittelalterlichen zur modernen Aufklärung*, edited by Alexander Altmann, 60–129. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1987.
- Baneth, David. "Judah Halevi and al- Ghazālī." In *Studies in Jewish Thought: An Anthology of German-Jewish Scholarship*, edited by Alfred Jospe, 181–199. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981.
- Bevan, Edwyn. *Stoics and Sceptics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913.
- Davidson, Herbert. "Maimonides on Metaphysical Knowledge." *Maimonidean Studies* 3 (1992–1993): 49–103.
- Davidson, Herbert. *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Feldman, Seymour. "Gersonides on Possibility of Conjunction with the Agent Intellect." *AJS Review* 3 (1978): 99–120.
- Feldman, Seymour. *Gersonides: Judaism Within the Limits of Reason*. Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010.
- Forte, Doron. "Back to the Sources: Alternative Versions of Maimonides' Letter to Samuel Ibn Tibbon and their Neglected Significance." *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 23 (2016): 47–90.
- Gaon, Saadia. *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*. Translated by Samuel Rosenblatt. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948.
- Gersonides. *The Wars of the Lord* Vol. 1. Translated by Seymour Feldman. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1984.
- Halevi, Judah. *The Kuzari*. Translated by Hartwig Hirschfeld. New York: Schocken Books, 1964.
- Harvey, Warren Zev. "How Leo Strauss Paralyzed the Study of the *Guide of the Perplexed* in the 20th Century." *Iyyun* 50 (2001): 387–396.
- Harvey, Warren Zev. *Rabbi Hasdai Crescas*. Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2010.
- Ibn Falaquera, Shem Tov. *Meqor Hayyim*. Tel Aviv: Mahbarot le-Sifrut, 1961.
- Ivry, Alfred. *Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed: A Philosophical Guide*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2016.
- Jospe, Raphael and Dov Schwartz, ed., *Jewish Philosophy: Perspectives and Retrospectives* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2012), 157–232.
- Klein, Peter. "Skepticism." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skepticism/>
- Klein-Braslavy, Sara. *Without Any Doubt: Studies in Gersonides' Methods of Inquiry*. Leiden: Brill, 2011.
- Kreisel, Howard. "Judah Halevi's Kuzari: Between the God of Abraham and the God of Aristotle." In *Joodse Filosofie tussen rede en traditie: Feestbundel ter ere van de tachtigste verjaardag van Prof. dr. H. J. Heering*, edited by Reinier Munk and F. J. Hoogewoud, 24–34. Kampen: Kok, 1993.
- Kreisel, Howard. "The Place of Man in the Hierarchy of Existence in the Philosophy of Ibn Gabirol and Maimonides." In *ʿAleī Shefer: Studies in the Literature of Jewish Thought*, edited by Moshe Hallamish, 97–100. Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1990.
- Kreisel, Howard. *Judaism as Philosophy: Studies in Maimonides and the Medieval Jewish Philosophers of Provence*. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2015.
- Kreisel, Howard. *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001.

- Krinis, Ehud. *God's Chosen People: Judah Halevi's Kuzari and the Shī'ī Imām Doctrine*. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2014.
- Lobel, Diana. *Between Mysticism and Philosophy: Sufi Language of Religious Experience in Judah Halevi's Kuzari*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000.
- Lorberbaum, Yair. "Maimonides on the Seventh Cause of Contradictions." *Tarbiz* 69 (2000): 211–237.
- Lorberbaum, Yair. "On Contradictions, Rationality, Dialectics and Esotericism in Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*." *Metaphysics* 55 (2002): 711–750.
- Maimonides, Moses. *The Guide of the Perplexed*. Translated by Shlomo Pines. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963.
- Melamed, Abraham. *On the Shoulders of Giants: The Debate between Moderns and Ancients in Medieval and Renaissance Jewish Thought*. Ramat-Gat: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2003.
- Neria, Chaim Meir. "Al-Fārābī's Lost Commentary on the Ethics: New Textual Evidence." *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 23 (2013): 69–99.
- Pessin, Sarah. *Ibn Gabirol's Theology of Desire: Matter and Method in Jewish Medieval Neoplatonism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Pines, Shlomo. "The Limitations of Human Knowledge according to Al-Fārābī, Ibn Bajja, and Maimonides." In *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, edited by Isadore Twersky, 82–109. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979.
- Ravitzky, Aviezer. "The Political Role of the Philosopher: Samuel Ibn Tibbon Versus Maimonides." In *Maimonides Studies* 5, edited by Arthur Hyman, 345–374. New York: The Michael Sharf Publication Trust of Yeshiva University Press, 2008.
- Ravitzky, Aviezer. "The Secrets of the *Guide of the Perplexed*: Between the Thirteenth and the Twentieth Centuries." In *Studies in Maimonides*, edited by Isadore Twersky, 159–207. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990.
- Schlanger, Jacques. *Le philosophie de Salomon Ibn Gabirol*. Leiden: Brill, 1968.
- Schwartz, Dov, and Raphael Jospe ed. *Jewish Philosophy: Perspectives and Retrospectives*. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2012.
- Stern, Josef. *The Matter and Form of Maimonides' Guide*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013.
- Vajda, Georges. "La philosophie et la théologie de Joseph Ibn Zaddik." *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge* 24 (1949): 93–181.
- Vogt, Katja. "Ancient Skepticism." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skepticism-ancient/>
- Wolfson, Elliot R. "Merkavah Traditions in Philosophical Garb: Judah Halevi Reconsidered." *PAAJR* 57 (1990): 179–242.
- Wolfson, Harry. *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929.
- Wolfson, Harry. *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, vol. 1. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.

Ariel Malachi

Scepticism at the Service of Revelation? Preliminary Observations on Logic and Epistemology in Judah Halevi's *Kuzari*

Introduction

How we should define scepticism is a fascinating question. Depending on differing definitions, we will arrive at different conclusions as to who can or cannot be characterized as sceptic. However, whether our answer to this fundamental enquiry be wide or narrow, inclusive or exclusive, casting doubt is clearly at its base.¹

According to the logical and epistemological Islamic-Aristotelian tradition, the distinction between arguments whose conclusions are certain and arguments whose conclusions are uncertain depends on the distinction between demonstrative arguments on the one hand and dialectical and rhetorical arguments on the other.² While demonstrative arguments are indeed accepted as certain, dialectical and rhetorical ones are bound to be doubtful to some degree. These epistemological distinctions between what is necessary and what is possible and what is certain and what is convincing or merely satisfactory were laid down by Aristotle and his commentators³

1 One might argue that classical forms of scepticism, such as Pyrrhonian or academic scepticism, do not naturally correspond to the medieval Jewish philosophical notion of doubt, although a few similarities can be found. Be that as it may, it seems that Jewish thinkers in Halevi's time were generally less interested in the general question of the possibility of attaining knowledge and more interested in the question of the possibility of attaining knowledge of specific issues, be those issues philosophical or religious. Therefore, even if they cannot be regarded as sceptical in the original sense, such thinkers do use sceptical strategies to one extent or another.

2 Cf. Arthur. J. Arberry, "Farabi's Canons of Poetry," *Rivista degli Studi Orientali*, 17 (1938): 266–278, esp. 268 (Arabic with English translation); Al-Fārābī, *Ihsa al-Ulum*, ed. Ali Milham (Beirut: Dar wa-maktaba al-Hilal, 1996), 38–41 (Arabic); Ibn-Sina, *Remarks and Admonitions: Part One: Logic*, Mediaeval Sources in Translation 28, trans. Shams Constantine Inati (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1984), 148; al-Ghazali, *Maqased Al-Falasifa*, ed. Mahmud Beju (Damascus: Al-Dabbah, 1998), 45 (Arabic). For an extensive scholarly discussion of these positions, see Deborah L. Black, *Logic and Aristotle's Rhetoric and Poetics in Medieval Arabic Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 1990). For these positions in the twelfth-century Jewish world, see for example Israel Efros, *Maimonides' Treatise on Logic* (New York, 1939), 47–48 (The original Arabic text was republished fully; see Israel Efros, "Maimonides' Arabic Treatise on Logic: Introduction," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* (1966): 42–155).

3 Aristotle, *Topics*, 100a25, trans. E.S. Forester (London & Massachusetts, 1966), 271; L. G. Westerink, "Elias on the Prior Analytics," *Mnemosyne*, Fourth Series, 14 (1961): 126–139; Elias, "Eliæ in Categoria Prooemium," in *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca*, 18, ed. Adolf Busse (Berlin: Reimer, 1900), 117.

and were discussed and developed extensively by Islamic philosophers in their logical treatises.⁴

The focus of this paper is Judah Halevi (d. 1141).⁵ In this paper, I will try to point out some preliminary observations regarding the way in which Halevi used sceptical aspects and strategies based on Aristotelian logic and epistemology at the service of revelation, that is, not only in the sense of criticising philosophy but also for establishing revelation itself.

First and foremost, Halevi was a renowned Spanish Jewish poet, arguably the most prominent Jewish poet in the Middle Ages.⁶ However, in addition to hundreds of poems,⁷ Halevi left us a unique theological-philosophical work whose impact on later Judaism was profound.⁸ This work, entitled *The Book of the Kuzari*, is an artfully styled dialogue between a Khazar king and a Jewish sage, polemically aiming mainly to criticise philosophy and to defend Jewish revelation.⁹

Many scholars acknowledge Halevi's harsh criticism of philosophy in the *Kuzari*.¹⁰ Some have even pointed out Halevi's use of philosophical tools to establish this criticism,¹¹ in a way that might be regarded as a sceptical approach towards philosophy.¹²

⁴ For the connection between the Greek commentators and Al-Fārābī, see Dimitri Gutas, "Paul the Persian on the Classification of the Parts of Aristotle's Philosophy: A Milestone between Alexandria and Baghdad," *Der Islam* 60 (1983): 231–267, esp. 255.

⁵ There are many scholarly sources discussing Halevi's biography. Among the relatively recent and important ones is Joseph Yahalom, *Yehuda Halevi: Poetry and Pilgrimage* (Jerusalem: Magness Press, 2009) (Hebrew).

⁶ Judah Alharizi, a respected twelfth-century Jewish poet himself, considers Halevi as second only to Ibn-Gabirol (Avicbron). See Judah Alharizi, *Tahkemoni, or, The Tales of Heman the Ezrahie*, ed. Joseph Yahalom and Naoya Katsumata (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the East, Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2010), 225.

⁷ Apart from very short and specific sections, they were mostly written in Hebrew.

⁸ For the impact of *The Book of the Kuzari* on Judaism, see Adam Shear, *The Kuzari and the Shaping of Jewish Identity: 1167–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁹ Unlike his poetry, Halevi wrote the *Kuzari* in Judeo-Arabic. The critical edition of the Judeo-Arabic text is Judah Halevi, *Kitab al-radd wa-'l-dalil fi'l-din al-dhalil (al-kitab al-Khazari)*, ed. David H. Baneth (Jerusalem: Magness Press, 1977). All of the following quotations from the original Judeo-Arabic text of the *Kuzari* correspond to this edition.

¹⁰ Several studies were devoted to Halevi's attitude towards philosophy and its criticism. For a brief review of Halevi's scholarship, see Diana Lobel, *Between Mysticism and Philosophy: Sufi Language of Religious Experience in Judah Ha-Levi's Kuzari* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), 6–9, and the bibliography mentioned.

¹¹ For example, see Raphael Jospe, *Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages: from Sa'adia Gaon to Maimonides*, vol. II (Ra'anana: Academic Studies Press, 2006), 205; 271.

¹² Barry Kogan explicitly argues that Halevi and al-Ghazali "Both turned the scepticism originally directed by philosophers against their respective religious traditions against the claims of philosophy itself. In doing so, they both made an important contribution to philosophy." See Barry S. Kogan, "Al-Ghazali and Halevi on Philosophy and the Philosophers," in *Medieval Philosophy and the Classical Tradition*, ed. John Inglis (Richmond: Routledge, 2002), 64–80, esp. 77.

Nevertheless, the general impression from many scholarly studies is that the criticism of philosophy is merely subsidiary to the main goal of the *Kuzari*, namely establishing revelation as an alternative to philosophy and accepting the authority of revelation over philosophy in a most unsceptical manner.¹³ This may explain why scholars tend not to give a consistent and systematic analysis of Halevi's criticism of philosophy, but rather a mere description of it. It would perhaps explain why, after years of research, Halevi's attitude towards philosophy is the subject of an ongoing debate, with almost as many perspectives as the number of scholars discussing this attitude.

Be that as it may, the most important reason for this debate is probably the fact that Halevi seems to contradict himself regarding his attitude towards philosophy in his *Kuzari*. These alleged contradictions are present in enough passages in the *Kuzari* that we can say that there are two competing tendencies throughout the book: a pro-philosophical tendency and an anti-philosophical one.¹⁴ Nevertheless, one might try to generalise prior research regarding the question of Halevi's attitude towards philosophy, with all the flaws inherent in such a generalisation, as an effort to measure the extent of his anti-philosophical approach. In this regard, one must not forget that some scholars maintained both competing tendencies simultaneously, justifying them with pedagogical or esoteric motives that Halevi may have had.¹⁵ Others simply argued that Halevi was ambivalent.¹⁶

One example of the contradictions within the book is Halevi's attitude towards two important issues in contemporary religious thought: the question of creation vs. eternity and the question of God's corporeality as described in the Bible. With regard

13 For example, see Eliezer Schweid, "Halevi and Maimonides as Representatives of Romantic versus Rationalistic Conceptions of Judaism," in *Kabbala und Romantik*, ed. Eveline Goodman-Thau, Gert Mattenklott, and Christoph Schulte (Tübingen: Walter de Gruyter, 1994), 279–292, esp. 284–285; Dov Schwartz, *Contradiction and Concealments in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2002), 57–62 (Hebrew).

14 Examples will follow in the next passage.

15 For the pedagogical motive, see Eliezer Schweid, "The 'Haver' as Pedagogue in The Book of The Kuzari," in *Judah Halevi's Thought*, ed. Haya Schwartz (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education, 1977), 33–40 (Hebrew). For the esoteric motive, see Leo Strauss, "The Law of Reason in the Kuzari," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, 13 (1943), 47–96, and Dov Schwartz, *Contradiction and Concealment in Medieval Jewish Thought*, 57–62 (Hebrew).

16 See Sara Wilenski-Heller, "The Relation Between Faith and Reason for Rabbi Judah Halevi," in *Judah Halevi's Thought*, 42 (Hebrew). Yochanan Silman, *Philosopher and Prophet: Judah Halevi, the Kuzari, and the Evolution of His Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), argued that Halevi's book was written over a long period of time, that Halevi changed his mind, and that his early thought and his later thought are both present in the book. Silman's approach earned some (one might add, quite justifiable) criticism; see Daniel Lasker, "Silman's Thinker and Seer," *Jewish Quarterly Review, New Series* 78 (1988): 314–315; Robert Eisen, "Yochanan Silman: Philosopher and Prophet," Book Review, *Speculum* 73 (1998): 596–598; Raphael Jospe, *Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages: From Sa'adia Gaon to Maimonides*, 308–318 (Hebrew); Yishai Glazner, "On the Writing of Judah Halevi's Kuzari," *Daat* 77 (2011): 5–16 (Hebrew), and more.

to the question of creation, the philosophical position in Halevi's time was that of eternity, and the opposing religious position was that God had created the world. In this matter, Halevi criticised the philosophical position and defended the religious view as he understood it. As he writes: "That which gives more weight to [the world's] complete innovation is the tradition from Adam, Noah, and Moses, peace be upon them, based on prophecy, which is more trustworthy than reasoning."¹⁷ Nevertheless, when it comes to the question of the corporeal attributes of God, he seems to argue differently. Through the Khazar king, Halevi raises the notion presented in the literal text of the Bible, which describes God as possessing hands, fingers, eyes, and so on, only to reject it completely due to reason:

The Khazar said: someone who hears your words to the effect that God addressed the multitude of you, wrote two tablets for you, and other such things would certainly be excused if he ascribes the idea of His being corporeal to you [...] Thus, you have an excuse for rejecting reason and intellectual speculation.

The sage said: God forbid me from [accepting] what is impossible and anything the intellect denies and posits as impossible.¹⁸

These passages might be read as a contrary stance towards two different philosophical positions. However, if we try to follow Halevi's arguments for his position on each passage, we will find them to be not merely contrary, but contradictory.

In the first passage, Halevi does not accept the philosophical position of the eternity of the world because he states as a principal position that tradition and prophecy are more trustworthy than reason and philosophy. That seems to be a mostly unsceptical approach aimed entirely against reason and philosophy in order to emphasize the superiority of revelation over any reasonable deliberation. However, in the second passage, the Haver seems to be almost agitated when the king raises the possibility of corporeality, as seems to be evident in the same prophetic tradition. Here, Halevi states as a principal position that revelation is subject to the scrutiny of reason. Therefore, one cannot regard the prophetic text as it is and must explain it according to the conclusions of reason. Here one might ask: if Halevi rejects the philosophical position of eternity because prophecy is more trustworthy than reasoning, then what would be the problem with God's corporeality? These corporeal properties are part of the prophetic text, and allegedly more truthful than conclusions based on reason. If so, why can we not accept them as they are in the prophetic text? On the other hand, if

¹⁷ Kuzari I, 67. In the original Judeo-Arabic: 'ירגח' אלנקהל ען אדם ונוח ומוסי ע'ה' באלנבוה אלתי הי' "אצדק מן אליקיאס". In this article, I use Professor Barry Kogan's unpublished translation. I would like to thank him for giving me the kind permission to do so. The source is cited following the critical edition by Baneth-Ben Shammai, as mentioned in note 9 above.

¹⁸ Kuzari I, 88–9: "קאל אלכ'ורי, אן מן יסמע כלאמכם אן אלהה כ'אטב גמהורכם וכתב לכם אלואחא וג'יר ד'לך: קאל אלחבר: ואעוד' באללה למעד'ור אן ינסב אליכם ראי אלתגסים [...] ותעד'רון פי אטראח אליקיאס ואלנט'ר אלעקלי. קאל אלחבר: ואעוד' באללה מן אלמחאל ומה ינפיה אלעקל ויצ'עה מחאלא".

reason and philosophy prevail over prophetic tradition and corporeal attributes are to be allegorised, why does reason not prevail over the prophetic tradition when it comes to the question of creation and force us to accept eternity?

This example and others mentioned in studies dealing with Halevi's attitude towards philosophy¹⁹ raise the following questions: how did Halevi construct his arguments? What made him lean towards philosophy in some issues and towards revelation in others? Is there really no coherence in Halevi's thought? Alternatively, is there a method underlying his attitude towards philosophy and reason? And if so, what are the implications of this method regarding the defence of revelation?

In trying to answer these questions, I would like to approach the ongoing debate from a different point of view. My attempt is to identify the principles of Halevi's criticism of philosophy. In this regard, I will try to argue that (a) the criticism of philosophy represents a use of sceptical strategies based on the logical and epistemological principles of Aristotelian logic, and (b) surprisingly, the same sceptical strategies are used by Halevi not only to criticise philosophy, but also to positively establish revelation. Consequently, I will try to suggest that for Halevi, not only can revelation be a legitimate alternative within the philosophical domain, but also that the same sceptical strategies elevate revelation over other philosophical alternatives. I will also try to argue that this approach can explain the apparently contradictory approaches towards philosophy in this text.

The main premise of my argument is Halevi's acquaintance with knowledge and the use of Aristotelian logic as presented in Islamic philosophical writings, i.e. the works of the *falāsifa*. Methodologically, this premise is to be primarily established using historical and philological discussions. The first stage is a historical discussion regarding the possibility of Halevi's acquaintance with logic, namely tracing historical evidence that the *falāsifa*'s logical writings were present in Al-Andalus by the first half of the twelfth century and that Halevi had access to them. The second stage is to analyse Halevi's text; that is, I will track and investigate the occurrences of logical terms in the *Kuzari*, the way in which they were used, and the implications of their use. Naturally, if a correct use of logical terms is found, this philological discussion alone can support Halevi's acquaintance with logic. Based on this premise, and after I establish it, I can begin to analyse Halevi's text and ideas from a new perspective and try to address the challenge of investigating the aforementioned issues.

Obviously, a complete discussion of these arguments and a full presentation of the arguments in relevant contemporary literature as well as in Halevi's *Kuzari* exceeds the limits of this article.²⁰ For this reason, I will present my arguments concerning Halevi's acquaintance with logic, his proper use of logical terminology, and his use

¹⁹ For some of those studies, see notes 10–13 above.

²⁰ Such a study is the main focus of my current research project, which is a monograph dedicated to the discussion of Halevi's approach to reason and philosophy.

of the same sceptical strategies both for criticising philosophy and for defending revelation by examining few telling examples. These examples will naturally include those regarding creation and God's corporeality. From these examples, I will attempt to draw my conclusions.

Islamic-Aristotelian background

How much Aristotelian logic could Halevi have known? This question is not that hard to answer. We have evidence that the logical writings of Al-Fārābī had reached Andalusia as early as the eleventh century and that Jewish scholars had studied and mastered this subject; at least, that is the testimony of Ibn Saïd al-Andalusi in his *Tabaqat al-Umam* (Categories of Nations).²¹ We can also find traces of this acquaintance in the writings of Jewish thinkers such as Bahya Ibn Paquda,²² Yosef Ibn Tsadiq,²³ and Moshe Ibn Ezra,²⁴ all more or less relatively close predecessors of Halevi. Nevertheless, this only proves that Halevi could or might have known Aristotelian logic, not his actual knowledge of the subject. For his actual knowledge, we must consult Halevi's *Kuzari*. As I will show, in the *Kuzari* one can find not only Halevi's actual acquaintance with Aristotelian logic, but also the proper use of its principles.

However, before I turn to Halevi's text, I would like to begin with a short description of some of the logical and epistemological principles relevant to the forthcoming discussion regarding Halevi's sceptical strategies. As we know, at the heart of Aristotelian logic lies the Aristotelian syllogism. Indeed, in contemporary scholarship most of the discussion of syllogisms deals with the ways to establish whether a specific syllogism is formally valid. However, as will follow, Aristotelian logic in the Middle

²¹ Šā'id ibn Aḥmad al-Andalusī, *Science in the Medieval World: Book of the Categories of Nations*, trans. Sema'an I. Salem and Austin Alok Kumar (University of Texas Press, 1996). Chapter 12 of the book deals with science in the Arab orient, including Al-Fārābī's work on logic. Chapter 13 of the book deals with philosophy and science in al-Andalus, and chapter 14 deals with the science of the people of Israel and also mentions a few Jewish scholars who studied and mastered logic. Though some of Halevi's arguments can be traced to Saadia Gaon's *Book of Beliefs and Convictions*, this does not mean they shared the same notion of logic. Saadia's logic, although possibly stoic, was not Aristotelian, and was not considered logic (*mantiq*) by the Muslim Aristotelians. See Charles H. Manekin, "Logic in Medieval Jewish Culture," in *Science in Medieval Jewish Cultures*, ed. Gad Freudenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 113–135, esp. 116. It is interesting to mention that Šā'id al-Andalusī does mention Saadia in his book, but not as a logician, only as a great religious scholar.

²² Bachya ben Joseph ibn Paquda, *Duties of the Heart*, trans. Rabbi Yosef Qafih (Jerusalem: Akiva Yosef Press, 1973), 35.

²³ Yosef Ibn-Tsadiq, *Microcosmos* (Leipzig, 1854), 5–6 (Hebrew). Ibn-Tsadiq mentions a book he wrote about logic. To the best of my knowledge, this book has not yet been discovered.

²⁴ Moshe ben Yaacov Ibn Ezra, *Kitāb al-muḥāḍarah wa-al-mudhā-karah*, trans. Avraham Shelomo Halkin (Jerusalem: Mekitsey Nirdamim, 1975), 12–13, 117–119.

Ages, as presented by Islamic thinkers, stressed not only the validity of the syllogism, but also its soundness in relation to the epistemological value of its premises.

According to Islamic-Aristotelian logic, the soundness of a syllogism is based on the truthfulness of its premises. How then can we know if our premises are true? That is the task of epistemology. Islamic-Aristotelian logic recognised several sources for primary knowledge to be used in the premises of a syllogism. These sources were presented in the writings of the most dominant figures of the *falāsifa* predeceasing Halevi, such as Al-Fārābī, Ibn Sina, and Al-Ghazālī.²⁵ The author of *Millot ha-Higgayon* (Treatise on Logic), presumably Maimonides,²⁶ summarised some of these principles in the eighth chapter of the treatise, though more in Al-Fārābī's style than Ibn Sina's, as follows:

The propositions which are known to be true and require no proof for their truthfulness are of four kinds: *perceptions*, as when we know that this is black, this is white, this is sweet, and this is hot; *first ideas*, as when we know that the whole is greater than the part, that two is an even number, and that things equal to the very same thing equal each other; *conventions [generally accepted] (mashhūrāt)*, as when we know that uncovering the privy parts is ugly, that compensating a benefactor generously is beautiful; and *traditions (maqbulāt)*, i.e., whatever is received from a chosen person or from a chosen assembly.²⁷

The most important terms for the discussion that will follow are these conventions and traditions. In the next stage, Maimonides discusses the differences between these primary sources of knowledge, from which he will draw later in the categorical epistemological distinctions:

Now as to perceptions and ideas, there is no difference among those of the human species that possess normal senses and intuitions, nor is there any contention for superiority among them with reference to their truthfulness. But as to *conventions [generally accepted]*, there is difference and rivalry for superiority, since there are propositions that have become known among one people and not among another; and whenever a precept is known among many peoples, its acceptability is stronger. Similarly, in the case of *traditions*, a tradition among one group may be lacking in another.²⁸

According to Maimonides, a thing that is obtained from whatever is perceived by means of a healthy sense is undoubtedly true. The same applies to first and second principles. He concludes:

²⁵ To the extent that we can include him amongst the *falāsifa* for his philosophical writings. Examples were mentioned in note 2 above.

²⁶ Davidson thinks otherwise; see Herbert A. Davidson, *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 313; Herbert A. Davidson, "Ibn al-Qiftī's Statement Regarding Maimonides' Early Study of Science," *Aleph* 14 (2014): 245–258. Stroumsa disagrees, see Sarah Stroumsa, *Maimonides in his World: Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 122–123; Sarah Stroumsa, "On Maimonides and on Logic," *Aleph* 14 (2014): 259–263.

²⁷ Moses Ben Maimon, *Maimonides' Treatise on Logic, The Original Arabic and Three Hebrew Translations*, trans. Israel Efros (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1938), 47.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 47–48.

After these preliminaries, you must know that every syllogism both of whose premises are apodictic, we call a demonstrative syllogism (*burhān*) [...] When, however, one or both premises of the syllogism belong to conventions [generally accepted], we call it a dialectic syllogism (*jadāl*) [...] When one or both premises of the syllogism belong to traditions, we call it a rhetorical syllogism (*khiṭāba*).²⁹

This analysis of syllogisms differentiates between the epistemological value of demonstrative arguments (*burhān*), which is certainty (*yaqīn*), and the value of dialectical and rhetorical arguments, which is persuasion (*iqnāʾ*),³⁰ all in accordance with the epistemic value of the premises.³¹ This analysis is based on the Islamic-Aristotelian tradition that exists, for example, in the writings of Al-Fārābī, Ibn Sina, and Al-Ghazālī.³²

One way or another, the important thing is that all of these thinkers who wrote about Aristotelian logic share the notion that syllogisms have a hierarchical structure that is dependent on the epistemological value of the premises used. As a result, the epistemological value of the conclusion is also hierarchal and is classified in relation

²⁹ Ibid., 48. Two more syllogisms later mentioned by Maimonides are the sophistic syllogism and the poetic syllogism. The *falāsifa* considered that each of these five kinds of syllogisms had been discussed in a separate book of Aristotle's *Organon*: demonstrative syllogisms in the *Posterior Analytics*; dialectical in *Topics*; rhetorical in *Rhetoric*; sophistic in *On Sophistical Refutations*; and poetical in *Poetics*. It is worth mentioning that there are differences between Aristotle's notion of these the premises of these syllogisms and those of the *falāsifa*. This is not the place to discuss them, and I will mention as an example only what Aristotle said in *Topics* 100a25: "Now reasoning is an argument in which, certain things being laid down, something other than these necessarily comes about through them. (a) It is a 'demonstration,' when the premises from which the reasoning starts are true and primary, or are such that our knowledge of them has originally come through premises, which are primary and true: (b) reasoning, on the other hand, is 'dialectical,' if it reasons from opinions that are generally accepted. Things are 'true' and 'primary' which are believed on the strength not of anything else but of themselves: for in regard to the first principles of science it is improper to ask any further for the why and wherefore of them; each of the first principles should command belief in and by itself." For an elaboration regarding Aristotle and Maimonides' *Treatise on Logic*, see Arthur Hyman, "Demonstrative, Dialectical and Sophistic Arguments in the Philosophy of Maimonides," in *Moses Maimonides and His Time*, ed. Eric L. Ormsby (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1989), 35–51.

³⁰ Another term used is "*Sukun al-nafs*," and it usually, but not exclusively, describes the epistemological value of the rhetorical syllogism. For the connections between dialectical and rhetorical arguments and for the fact that one can attribute persuasion to both arguments (to a different extent), see Al-Fārābī, *Ihsa al-Ulum*, 41–42.

³¹ In this sense, what one is certain of is the truthfulness of the conclusions. It does not mean that dialectical and rhetorical arguments cannot be true. Their truthfulness is possible (and might even be probable) but is never certain.

³² For a detailed analysis including many references to the original sources, see Deborah L. Black's excellent discussion in *Logic and Aristotle's Rhetoric and Poetics in Medieval Arabic Philosophy*, 94–101. There are differences between all these thinkers regarding the classification of the premises, but they all agree that the epistemic value of the syllogism is based on the epistemic value of its premises. Maimonides' analysis is closer to Al-Fārābī's position and al-Ghazali is closer to Avicenna.

to the epistemic value of the premises that comprise the syllogism. To summarise briefly, one can say that:

- a. Methodologically, syllogisms based on perceptions and/or first and second principles are demonstrative (*burhān*); syllogisms based on conventions (generally accepted, literally “well-known notions” – *mashhūrāt*) are dialectical (*jadāl*), and syllogisms based on tradition (literally “accepted” – *maqbulāt*) are rhetorical (*khiṭāba*).
- b. Epistemologically, the conclusion of a demonstrative syllogism (*burhān*) is certain, while the conclusion of other syllogisms can only be persuasive or satisfying (*iqnāʾ*) at most.
- c. Epistemologically, persuading arguments may have different degrees of persuasion depending on the epistemic value of the premises.
- d. According to the *falāsifa*, all kinds of syllogisms fall under the purview of logic.³³

Halevi's *Kuzari*

Now we can turn to Halevi's *Kuzari*. Halevi was obviously familiar with these logical and epistemological principles: he mentioned them in his book. For example, in the fifth chapter of the book, while extensively paraphrasing Ibn Sina and following his original text known as *On the Soul*, he specifically mentions all five kinds of syllogism.³⁴ Furthermore, he used these logical principles correctly. A good example is a telling reference to the epistemological hierarchy of the different syllogisms, discussed during the Jewish sage's first attack on philosophy. In the very first paragraphs of the discussion between the king and the Jewish sage, the sage points out the diversity of the philosophers' views and practices regarding their notion of religion. Then the Jewish sage says: “they are [merely] claims. Some of them, they are able to demonstrate. Some of them, they can support persuasively and some of them they cannot even support persuasively, let alone demonstrate.”³⁵ Another example is when the king is impressed by philosophical arguments. Then the Jewish sage says: “This is what I was afraid of concerning you – that you would let yourself be deceived and calmly accede to their opinions. After their demonstrations in the mathematical sciences and logic turned out to be sound, according to them, people willingly

³³ This includes not only dialectical and rhetorical syllogisms, but also poetic ones. See Black, 1–13.

³⁴ For a discussion regarding Halevi's use of Ibn-Sina's *On The Soul*, especially regarding logic and this classification of syllogisms, see Ariel Malachi, “*On the Soul* by Ibn-Sina: A Remark To The Hebrew Translation and Its Implication For Judah Halevi,” *Da'at*, 82 (2016): 111–121 (Hebrew).

³⁵ *Kuzari* 1, 13: “אד' הי דעאוי, מנהא מא יקדרון אן יברהנא עליהא ומנהא מא יקנעון פיה ומנהא מא לים יקנעון פיה: פצ'לא ען אלברהאן” For the connections between dialectical and rhetorical arguments and for the fact that one can attribute persuasion to both arguments (to a different extent), see for example, Al-Fārābī, *Ihsa al-Ulum*, 41–42.

accepted everything they said about physics and metaphysics, [wrongfully] thinking all they said was demonstrative.”³⁶ These examples and others demonstrate that Halevi not only knew the *falāsifa*’s logical-hierarchical-epistemological methodology, but that he also used it and its terminology correctly. For someone who is ignorant of the background of Aristotelian logic, these examples might seem to merely describe Halevi’s criticism of philosophy; however, for one who is familiar with this background, these examples are much more than that: they locate the criticism of philosophy in its pretension to certainty even where it lacks it. I think this is the key to unveiling Halevi’s attitude, not only towards the criticism of philosophy, but also towards the establishment of revelation.

How then did Halevi use these logical and epistemological distinctions? I wish to demonstrate this through the same telling example I used to demonstrate the contradicting tendencies within the *Kuzari*, namely the questions of creation and of God’s corporeality. I think that these are among the few places in the *Kuzari* in which the learned reader, a reader who knows logic and pays attention to the logical terms, can wholly grasp Halevi’s argument.

Let us turn to the text again, but within a wider context. Naturally, as a Jewish religious thinker, when Halevi discusses the question of the origin of the world, he confronts Aristotle’s notion of eternity with what he believes to be the Jewish position on creation. He first criticises Aristotle and then turns to defending Judaism. This is how he criticises Aristotle:

He demanded of his mind and his own thinking, since he had no knowledge from someone he could trust in tradition. Thus, he reflected [...] Now, it was as difficult for his way of thinking to conceive of a beginning [for the world] as it was [to conceive of its] eternity in the past; but he [ultimately] gave greater weight to those of his deductions that assert the eternity [of the world] in the past by means of his abstract thinking. He didn’t think of asking about the chronology of those who had lived before him or about how people were related to one another. If the Philosopher had lived within a nation [in which] he had inherited *traditions* and *generally-accepted* [beliefs] that could not be rejected,³⁷ he would have used his reasoning and demonstration to establish the possibility of the [world’s] complete innovation.³⁸

³⁶ Kuzari 5, 14: "והד'א אלדי' כנת אכ'אפה עליך מן אלאנב'דאע וסכון אלנפס אלי אראיהם למא צח ענהם אלברהאן: "פה אלעלום אלריאצ'יה ואלמנטק טאבת אלנפוס עלי כל מא קאלוה פ' אלטביעה ופי מא בעד אלטביעה, וט'ן אן כל מא קאלוה ברהאן".

³⁷ The fact that such premises cannot be rejected does not entail that they are certain, but at most that they are possible alongside other possibilities one cannot reject, in this case the eternity of the world.

³⁸ Kuzari 1, 65, emphasis added: "נעם אנה כלף ד'הנה ופכרתה למא לם יכן ענדה כ'בר מן ית'קה תקלידא, פתפכר: [...] פצעב עלי פכרה תצור אלאבתדא כמא צעב איצ'א אלקדם, לכן רגח קיאסאתה אלקאילה באלקדם במגרד פכרה, ולם יר אן יסאל ען תארד' מן כאן קבלה, ולא כף אנתסב אלנאס, ולו כאן אלפילסוף פי אמה ירת' מקבולאט ומשהוראט לא מדפע לה פיהא, לצרף קיאסאתה וברהאנה פי תמכנה אלחדת".

This passage from Halevi's discussion of creation, I believe, presents the careful reader with a coherent and rational attitude towards the relationship between reason and revelation, all through the prism of contemporary principles of logic and its sceptical strategies, methods, and aspects. As I mentioned above, a conclusion is as sound as its premises. If we analyse what Halevi says here, we can see that he criticises Aristotle's opinion of eternity as one that is based on mere speculation³⁹ rather than on sound premises. He then suggests that, although he could have, Aristotle but did not try to search for premises that were well-known or generally accepted ("He didn't think of asking").⁴⁰ Such probable premises, though not certain as those derived from perceptions of first intelligibles, are sounder than mere speculation; therefore, their conclusions will be sounder as well. All of this is in accordance with Aristotelian logic as described earlier. We can also note the seeds of the defence of the Jewish creational attitude: the lack of tradition⁴¹ is soon to be fulfilled by Jewish tradition, functioning as "mashhūrāt" and "maqbulāt."

Consequently, the king understands that if the Jewish sage raises issues from the realm of logic and epistemology, then that means we need to strive for "burhān," meaning demonstrative proof based on perception and/or first and second principles that lead to certainty, something lacked by both tradition and speculation. The king is still in search of certain demonstration; therefore, it is not surprising that he is not satisfied and immediately asks the Jewish sage: "The Khazar said: In demonstration, is there such a thing as giving greater weight [to one opinion rather than another]."⁴² The Jewish sage understands that the king has grasped the heart of his sceptical criticism of Aristotle's philosophical position and, therefore, he can develop the defence of Judaism. He answers:

Who, indeed, could provide us with the [decisive] demonstration on this question? God forbid that the Law should teach something that repudiates [the testimony of] direct sense experience or [the conclusion of] a demonstration! [...] The question of the [world's] eternity in the past and of [its] complete innovation is profound, and the proofs [in favour] of the two arguments counterbalance one another. In that case, then, that which gives more weight to [the world's] complete innovation is the *tradition* from Adam, Noah, and Moses, peace be upon them, based on prophecy, which is *more trustworthy than reasoning*.⁴³

39 "Abstract thinking" (במגרד פכרה).

40 The text does not specifically state "premises," but Halevi uses the words "mashhūrāt" and "maqbulāt" (משהוראת ומקבולאת), which are the original Arabic terms for the premises used in dialectical and rhetorical syllogisms (respectively). Halevi admits that Aristotle is to be excused for lacking these kinds of premises, as he says in *Kuzari* 1,63, and in *Kuzari* 5,14 (twice).

41 An idea which was already expressed by Plato in the beginning of *Timaeus*, specifically regarding the issue of creation: see Plato, *Timaeus*, 22b.

42 Kuzari 1, 66: "קאל אלכ'ורי: והל פי אלברהאן תרגיח?"

43 Kuzari 1, 67, emphasis added: באללה אן יאתי אלשרע 'קאל אלחבר, ומן לנא פי אלמסאלה באלברהאן אעוד' באללה אן יאתי אלשרע (משווראת ומקבולאת), which are the original Arabic terms for the premises used in dialectical and rhetorical syllogisms (respectively). Halevi admits that Aristotle is to be excused for lacking these kinds of premises, as he says in *Kuzari* 1,63, and in *Kuzari* 5,14 (twice). במא ידפע עינא או ברהאנא [...] ומסאלה' אלקדם ואלחדת' ג'אמצה' ודלאיל אלחגתי מתכאפיה, ת'ס ירגח אלחדת' אלנקל ען אדם ונוח ומוסי ע'ה' באלנבוה אלתי הי אעדק מן אלקיאס."

Now we can see the development of Halevi's argument. A demonstrative undoubted proof (*burhān*) can overcome any religion or tradition. Therefore, it is not possible that religion or tradition will contradict a demonstrative proof. In this sense, it can be said that reason overcomes the literal apprehension of revelation. In fact, this is the case for the abovementioned example of God's corporeality. Halevi, like many of his contemporaries, seems to accept that reason had reached demonstration regarding the question of God's corporeality, and, therefore, the prophetic text cannot contradict the philosophical demonstrative conclusion that God has no corporeal attributes. On the other hand, regarding creation, there is no such proof and we cannot achieve certainty (*yaqīn*) through reason.⁴⁴ The important argument is that this fact does not give us an excuse to turn directly to mere speculation, for according to the principles of logic that Aristotle himself developed, we can still use *mashhūrāt* or *maqbulāt* as premises that can give us persuasive conclusions. This is where the Jewish tradition of arguing for creation becomes important, for it is logically possible⁴⁵ as well as widely accepted, trustworthily transmitted, etc., as Halevi develops throughout his book.

The outcome is that, according to Halevi, if one is a true disciple of Aristotle the logician,⁴⁶ one will, at times, have to reject Aristotle the metaphysician. In other words, according to Aristotle's logic, one must be sceptical about any argument that is not demonstratively proven in the strict way approved by Aristotelian logic. Where we have no demonstrative proof, we argue in favour of the traditional Jewish premises, which are logically possible, over the speculative philosophical premises, which are also logically possible in just the same manner. In this way, according to Aristotelian logical principles, we will have persuasive and satisfactory conclusions rather than merely speculative ones. That is exactly how the king concludes this discussion: "Thus far I find these arguments quite satisfactory. Should we continue our conversation, I will trouble thee to adduce more decisive proofs."⁴⁷ One might add that "more decisive proofs" were not requested or given later on, so it is clear that Halevi's argument for creation is not positioned as certain like Aristotle's is, although it is positioned as more persuasive.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ This is exactly what Maimonides argues in a telling and concise manner, see Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), II:25, 328: "That the deity is not a body has been demonstrated; from this it follows that everything that in its external meaning disagrees with this demonstration must be interpreted figuratively [...] However, the eternity of the world has not been demonstrated. Consequently [...] the texts ought not to be rejected and figuratively interpreted in order to make prevail an opinion whose contrary can be made to prevail by means of various sorts of arguments."

⁴⁵ They cannot be rejected, meaning reason cannot offer certain proof against their possibility.

⁴⁶ At least in the manner in which Jewish and Islamic thinkers perceived Aristotle's logic.

⁴⁷ Kuzari 1, 68: "קאל אלכ'זר, תכפיני הד'ה אלחג אלמקנעה פי אלבאב. ואן טאלת צחבתי לך טאכלפך אן תערץ' עלי." אלחג אלמקנעה.

⁴⁸ Another part of Halevi's discussion of creation also supports this conclusion. At the end of his discussion, before the king concludes as mentioned, Halevi says (1, 67): "But even if an adherent of

From these discussions of creation vs. eternity and God's corporeal attributes, we can see how reason and revelation are synthesised in a manner grounded in epistemology and logic and based on the same sceptical strategies. We can see that reason serves revelation in the sense that reason serves as a criterion for the proper understanding of revelation, just as revelation serves reason where reason alone cannot reach demonstrative conclusions.

Yet there is one additional point: for the leading logicians amongst the *falāsifa*, such as Al-Fārābī, the fact that dialectical and rhetorical arguments are inferior to demonstration, does not mean that they are not helpful. Such arguments are focused on convincing the masses, but the learned must always strive for demonstration.⁴⁹ How does this relate to what we have described as Halevi's attitude? Does it mean that his dialectical and rhetorical basis for the defence of Judaism is intended for the masses? Does it mean that Halevi's argumentation carries no real value for the learned reader? I would suggest that the answer to the second question is yes, while the answer to the third is no. In other words, Halevi's argumentation is indeed at most dialectical, and in this manner – as Al-Fārābī stated – it is for the masses, but that does not mean that the learned reader has nothing to gain from it.

I do not think it is in doubt that the *Kuzari* was written for non-philosophers. In this sense, the rhetorical and dialectical establishment of Judaism would suffice for Halevi's purposes just as for Al-Fārābī's. However, Halevi's introduction to the *Kuzari* implies that he also intended it for learned readers, especially when he states "and the intelligent will understand" in the concluding words of his introduction.⁵⁰

the [revealed] Law is forced to concede and acknowledge the existence of eternal matter and many worlds prior to this world, there is nothing in this that refutes his belief that this world came into existence completely new at a specific time in the past and that its first human inhabitants were *Adam* and *Eve*." ובעד אן ילגא אלמחשרע אלי אלתסלים ואלאקראר בהיולי קדימה, ועואלם בת'רה קבל הד'א אלעאלם, לים) (פי ד'לך מטען פי אעתקאדה אן הד'א אלעאלם תאדת' מגד' מדה מחצלה ואול נאסה אדם וחווה). If Halevi thought his argument for creation was indeed certain, how may one concede something that is certainly not true? Some translators read the beginning of this passage differently, but their translations also do not exclude the mere possibility of some eternal matter or worlds. See *The Book of Kuzari*, trans. Michael Schwarz (Beer-Sheba: Beer-Sheba University Press, 2017), 31 n. 239 (Hebrew).

⁴⁹ For example, see Al-Fārābī, *The Political Writings: Selected Aphorisms and Other Texts*, Book of Religion, trans. Charles E. Butterworth (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 98.

⁵⁰ This is Halevi's Hebrew quote from Daniel 12, 10: "והמשכילים יבינו." This quotation provides evidence that Halevi's book was aimed, at least partly, at intelligent readers. Indeed, a minimal reading of this passage might suggest that these words refer only to Halevi's statement that he will write down the dialogue as it actually occurred "and the intelligent will understand" that he is really inventing the whole thing. In "The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*," *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 101, n. 17, Leo Strauss criticised this minimal reading as follows: "This remark cannot possibly refer to the fact that the conversations are fictitious; for this is evident even to those who do not understand." I will add that this minimal reading does not consider the context of the verse within the Book of Daniel, and the way this quotation and similar expressions

Such readers will understand that Halevi has not demonstratively proven Judaism. Therefore, one might argue that the Aristotelian logic Halevi used is as destructive to non-demonstrative Judaism as it is to non-demonstrative philosophy. If so, how could the contemporary learned reader value Halevi's non-demonstrative defence of Judaism?

I think the answer lies in the contemporary development of the perception of logic. Using the examples of Al-Ghazālī and Abū'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī, both writing in the first half of the twelfth century – as did Halevi himself – Frank Griffel showed how Arab philosophers realised, in a very sceptical manner, that demonstrative conclusions are not always attainable. Therefore, when that was the case, they turned to lower levels of proof instead, such as dialectic, when possible. Their attitude did not devalue demonstration,⁵¹ but only stated that it cannot always be attained. Therefore, even for the learned reader, lower levels of proof, those attaining satisfaction (*iqnā*), should suffice when necessary. Halevi, their contemporary, stood in the forefront of the philosophical developments of his time and used those developments to defend Judaism in a manner that would suit even learned readers through the same logical-epistemological attitude they cherished.⁵²

One can say that the “case study” of the examples offered from the *Kuzari* points out Halevi's criticism of philosophy on the one hand and the defence of Judaism on the other, using the same logical and epistemological principles employed by the *falāsifa* in accordance with their understanding of Aristotelian logic. In this context, I argue that, even though Halevi rejected philosophical premises and, as a result, philosophical conclusions, he did not reject the philosophical method itself, i.e. the contemporary principles of logic and epistemology. In this sense, I think it is clear how Halevi offered the learned reader a rational and coherent attitude towards the relations between revelation and philosophy, an attitude that is based on these logical principles. It is also clear that Halevi used philosophy to serve his purposes in quite a philosophical way. Halevi's criticism of philosophy

were used by Halevi's contemporaries, such as, for example, Abraham Ibn Ezra in his *Yesod Mora* as well as in his commentaries on the Bible. It might be interesting to mention that (late) medieval Jewish thinkers were already stretching themselves with this question. For example, Yehuda ben Shemuel of Lunel mentions both the minimal and the non-minimal reading of the text. Azariah Di Rossi explicitly mentions the minimal reading of this text, though does not explicitly exclude the non-minimal reading of it. See Dov Swartz, ed., *Commentary on the Kuzari: Heshek Shelomoh by R. Shelomoh Ben Yehuda of Lunel* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2007), 48 (Hebrew); Azaria De' Rossi, *The Light of the Eyes*, trans. Jianna Weinberg (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 527–528.

⁵¹ It must be mentioned that Al-Ghazali attacked the mere notion of certainty of *burhān* in his *Deliverance from Error*; see Al-Ghazali, *The Faith and Practice of Al Ghazali*, trans. W. Montgomery Watt (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1963), 8–11.

⁵² Halevi's familiarity with Islamic philosophy, including contemporaries such as Ibn-Bajja, is demonstrated by Ehud Krinis, “The Arabic Background of the *Kuzari*,” *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, 21 (2013): 1–56.

represents a sceptical attitude (even if partial and not total) in which one must question everything that cannot be positioned as certain, according to the logical and epistemological principles of Aristotelian logic and its sceptical aspects. For Halevi, the outcome was scepticism towards much of philosophy, which he based on a careful analysis of the philosophical arguments that showed them to be questionable and dubitable according to the logical and epistemological principles of Aristotelian logic itself.

However, I also think that Halevi realised that, for the intelligent reader, this did not result in the obvious triumph of revelation, since revelation suffers from the same logical-epistemological deficiencies and is affected by that same sceptical analysis.⁵³ That is why, alongside the sceptical aspects of his criticism, Halevi developed his dialectical arguments using Aristotelian logical principles in order to establish dialectically through persuasion that which could not be proven demonstratively. This way, the same sceptical aspects can elevate revelation over other philosophical possibilities; that is, they can propose revelation not only as a legitimate option philosophically, but as more persuasive than and preferable to the other alternatives.

Conclusion

Existing studies tend to ignore logic when they come to discuss the relationship between philosophy and religion in the *Kuzari*. Indeed, until the twelfth century, we have almost no logical writings by Jewish thinkers. However, one cannot ignore the influence of the logical treatises by Muslim thinkers, nor that of their philosophical and theological writings. In this preliminary paper, I argue that logical and epistemological distinctions between what is demonstrative and therefore accepted as certain and what is not demonstrative and therefore doubtful were used not only to criticise philosophy, but also to establish (Jewish) revelation. Paying attention to the logical terminology in the *Kuzari* enables us to read the book from a new perspective, one I believe Halevi addressed to the twelfth-century Jewish intellectual audience, which was already engaged with philosophy, at least to a certain extent. Such a logical perspective was indeed stressed by Halevi in the introductory passage of the *Kuzari*, when he himself described the following arguments in the book as persuasive, and nothing more: “Some of the arguments of the sage seemed persuasive to me and in agreement with my own belief. Accordingly, I thought that I should

⁵³ We were not present for the miracles described in the Bible, for the exodus from Egypt, or for the revelation on Mount Sinai: we have only traditions about them that, according to Aristotelian logic, are doubtful and not certain. However, as Halevi develops in the *Kuzari*, they can be persuasive.

- Glazner, Yishai. "On the Writing of Judah Halevi's *Kuzari*." *Daat* 77 (2011): 5–16.
- Gutas, Dimitri. "Paul the Persian on the Classification of the Parts of Aristotle's Philosophy: A Milestone between Alexandria and Baghdad." *Der Islam* 60 (1983): 231–267.
- Halevi, Judah. *Kitab al-radd wa-'l-dalil fi'l-din al-dhalil (al-kitab al-Khazari)*, edited by David H. Baneth. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1977.
- Halevi, Judah. *The Book of Kuzari*. Translated by Michael Schwarz. Beer-Sheba: Beer-Sheba University Press, 2017 [Hebrew].
- Hyman, Arthur. "Demonstrative, Dialectical and Sophistic Arguments in the Philosophy of Maimonides." In *Moses Maimonides and His Time*, edited by Eric L. Ormsby. Washington: Catholic University of America Press (1989): 35–51.
- Ibn Ezra, Moshe ben Yaacov. *Kitāb al-muḥāḍarah wa-al-mudhā-karah*. Translated by Avraham Shelomo Halkin. Jerusalem: Mekitsey Nirdamim, 1975.
- Ibn Paquda, Bachya ben Joseph. *Duties of the Heart*. Translated by Rabbi Yosef Qafih. Jerusalem: Akiva Yosef Press, 1973.
- Ibn-Tsadik, Yosef. *Microcosmos*. Leipzig: Jellinek, 1854.
- Jospe, Raphael. *Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages: From Sa'adia Gaon to Maimonides*. Raanana: Academic Studies Press, 2006.
- Kogan, Barry S. "Al-Ghazālī and Halevi on Philosophy and the Philosophers." In *Medieval Philosophy and the Classical Tradition*, edited by John Inglis, 64–80. Richmond: Routledge, 2002.
- Krinis, Ehud. "The Arabic Background of the *Kuzari*." *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 21 (2013): 1–56.
- Lasker, Daniel J. "Silman's Thinker and Seer." *Jewish Quarterly Review, New Series* 78 (1988): 314–315.
- Lobel, Diana. *Between Mysticism and Philosophy: Sufi Language of Religious Experience in Judah Ha-Levi's Kuzari*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2000.
- Maimonides, Moses. *Maimonides' Treatise on Logic, The Original Arabic and Three Hebrew Translations*. Translated by Israel Efros. New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1938.
- Maimonides, Moses. *The Guide of the Perplexed*. Translated by Shlomo Pines. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963.
- Malachi, Ariel. "On the Soul By Ibn-Sina: A Remark to the Hebrew Translation and its Implication for Judah Halevi." *Da'at* 82 (2016): 111–121 [Hebrew].
- Manekin, Charles H. "Logic in Medieval Jewish Culture." In *Science in Medieval Jewish Cultures*, edited by Gad Freudenthal, 113–135. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Plato. *Complete Works*. Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.
- Schwartz, Dov. ed. *Commentary on the Kuzari: Heshek Shelomoh by R. Shelomoh Ben Yehuda of Lunel*. Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2007 [Hebrew].
- Schwartz, Dov. *Contradiction and Concealment in Medieval Jewish Thought*. Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2002 [Hebrew].
- Schweid, Eliezer. "Halevi and Maimonides as Representatives of Romantic versus Rationalistic Conceptions of Judaism." In *Kabbala und Romantik*, edited by Eveline Goodman-Thau, Gert Mattenklott, and Christoph Schulte, 279–292. Tübingen: Walter de Gruyter, 1994.
- Schweid, Eliezer. "The 'Haver' as Pedagogue in The Book of The Kuzari." In *Judah Halevi's Thought*, edited by Haya Schwartz, 33–40. Jerusalem: Ministry of Education, 1977 [Hebrew].
- Shear, Adam. *The Kuzari and the Shaping of Jewish Identity: 1167–1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Silman, Yochanan. *Philosopher and Prophet: Judah Halevi, the Kuzari, and the Evolution of His Thought*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.
- Staruss, Leo. *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

Staruss, Leo. "The Law of Reason in the Kuzari." *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 13 (1943): 47–96.

Stroumsa, Sarah. *Maimonides in his World: Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.

Stroumsa, Sarah. "On Maimonides and on Logic." *Aleph* 14 (2014): 259–263.

Westerink, Leendert G. "Elias on the Prior Analytics." *Mnemosyne, Fourth Series*, 14 (1961): 126–139.

Wilenski-Heller, Sara. "The Relation Between Faith and Reason for Rabbi Judah Halevi." In *Judah Halevi's Thought*, edited by Haya Schwartz, 41–52. Jerusalem: Ministry of Education, 1977 [Hebrew].

Yahalom, Joseph. *Yehuda Halevi: Poetry and Pilgrimage*. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2009 [Hebrew].

Dov Schwartz

The Passion for Metaphysics in Maimonides' Thought

My concern in this paper is five chapters in *Guide of the Perplexed* I:31–35. Centring on an educational and didactic issue, this unit deals with the proper approach to the study of metaphysics as manifest in the requirements concerning four aspects:

1. A scientific aspect: preceding the study of metaphysics by the study of other sciences (logic, mathematics, physics, and astronomy).
2. A methodological aspect: preserving proper rules of thought, proceeding cautiously and constantly examining the arguments.
3. An ethical aspect: focusing exclusively on the study of these sciences and keeping away from material concerns.
4. A political aspect: concern for the masses – guaranteeing they do not exceed the limited boundaries of their comprehension while ensuring their access to a minimum of metaphysical assumptions.

I will argue that, in this unit, Maimonides relies on what he views as an almost uncontrollable urge to reach the summits of knowledge. I will further argue that Maimonides turned the passion for metaphysics into a powerful political and theological factor. The conclusion of the discussion will be that this unit is one of the most concentrated expressions of Maimonidean rationalism.

Several questions recur in discussions about the *Guide*: Maimonides' aim in writing the book, his attitude towards science and its connection to revelation on the one hand, and towards biblical exegesis and rabbinic sources on the other. Additional questions touch on the character of the book, the reason for the order of its chapters, its concealment techniques, the identification of esoteric ideas, and so forth. The proper attitude towards the study of metaphysics brings all these questions to the surface.

Metaphysics in the *Guide of the Perplexed*

In many respects, the *Guide of the Perplexed* was meant to pave the way for the intellectual to acquire metaphysical knowledge. Maimonides viewed metaphysics as a clearly esoteric realm and held that the rabbis had referred to it as *ma'aseh merkavah* [the account of the Chariot] and, in some sense, also as *sitrei Torah* [mysteries of the Torah].

Note: An extended version of this article has been published in Hebrew in *Da'at* 81 (2016): 162–206. Thanks to Batya Stein, who translated and edited this article.

To prevent misunderstandings regarding the importance of metaphysics, Maimonides opens the *Guide* with a discussion of the divine attributes, first validating the negation of anthropomorphism in the lexicographical chapters, and then dealing directly with the doctrine of the attributes. Accordingly, the *Guide* is built as an inverse pyramid regarding the quality of the sciences and the extent of their concealment: it opens with the most secret issues (attributes) and considers their substantive and hermeneutical aspects, and slowly descends into more “revealed” issues, from creation and prophecy to the reasons for the commandments and the practical conduct of the perfect human. Maimonides painstakingly explained that metaphysics cannot be approached as any other body of knowledge and devoted considerable efforts to understand the conditions and the background needed for its acquisition.

Within the lexicographical chapters in Part I of the *Guide*, therefore, Maimonides embedded a unit of five chapters dealing with a quasi-educational, ethical, and pedagogical preparation for the doctrine of divine attributes. One embarking in the study of this doctrine faces, in his view, a kind of paradox: the doctrine of divine attributes is the apex of the sciences and its natural locus is metaphysics that, for Maimonides, is the very summit of scientific thought. This doctrine, however, leads to the negation of the attributes, claiming that God cannot be conceived in human thought or described through human language. The tense discussions of negative knowledge require a certain “consciousness,” implying an understanding of human personality and its adaptation to the task of learning the doctrine of attributes. Beyond the cognitive endeavour, then, the dialectic of affirmation and negation requires caution and restraint. Developing this consciousness was the purpose of chapters 31–35 in Part I of the *Guide*.

References to *Guide* I:31–35 as a freestanding unit are already found in medieval commentaries (R. Moses b. Joshua of Narbonne, R. Shem Tov b. Isaac ibn Shem Tov, and R. Mordecai Comitiyano). In many classic studies from the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, the unit of chapters 31–35 was conflated with the discussion of the divine attributes and references to these chapters were mostly incidental. Over time, however, research on Maimonides has expanded and, more recently, scholars have examined partial aspects of the chapters in this unit: Joel Kraemer discusses the relationship between Maimonides’ scientific method and the passion for metaphysics¹; Sarah Stroumsa presented the Muslim model fitting the figure of Elisha ben Abuyah set forth in chapter 32²; Amira Eran studied the connection between chapters 33–34 and the concept of “artifice”³; Sara Klein-Braslavy examined key terms in the unit as part of a general discussion of the *Guide*’s esoteric

1 Joel L. Kraemer, “Maimonides on Aristotle and Scientific Method,” in *Moses Maimonides and His Time*, ed. Eric L. Ormsby (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1989): 53–88.

2 Sarah Stroumsa, “Elisha ben Abuyah and Muslim Heretics in Maimonides’ Writings,” *Maimonidean Studies* 3 (1992–1993): 175–183.

3 Amira Eran, “‘Artifice’ as a Device for the Study of the Divinity in the Writings of Maimonides and Averroes,” *Pe’amim* 61 (1995): 109–131 [Heb].

methodology⁴; James Diamond explored the hermeneutical and conceptual background of Elisha ben Abuyah's character in chapter 32⁵; Menachem Kellner examined the connection between chapters 32–33 and how Maimonides grappled with mysticism,⁶ and Armand Maurer discussed the relationship between these chapters and the definition of metaphysics.⁷

The theses

Concerning Maimonides' approach to the study of metaphysics in the chapters of the unit, I will make the following arguments⁸:

1. The student of metaphysics confronts a series of obstacles.
2. The greatest and most dangerous obstacle is the passion for metaphysics, the uncontrollable longing for universal knowledge.
3. Sexual desire most accurately clarifies the nature of the passion for metaphysics.
4. The passion for metaphysics characterizes all humans, by their very nature.⁹
5. Balancing the passion for metaphysics in broad sections of the public requires political ability.
6. The passion for metaphysics is the most accurate expression of Maimonidean rationalism.
7. To illustrate the dangers of the passion for metaphysics, Maimonides presented a partial and tendentious description of the sources of Talmudic mysticism.

But why does the discussion of metaphysics in these chapters not revolve entirely around content and hermeneutical considerations dealing with the divine attributes and the immaterial substances? Why address issues pertaining to human nature, such as the order of study, proper education, and so forth?

⁴ Sara Klein-Braslavy, *King Solomon and Philosophical Esotericism in the Thought of Maimonides* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1996), Part One [Heb].

⁵ James A. Diamond, "The Failed Theodicy of a Rabbinic Pariah: A Maimonidean Recasting of Elisha ben Abuyah," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 9 (2003): 353–380.

⁶ Menachem M. Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism* (Oxford: Littman Library, 2006).

⁷ Armand A. Maurer, "Maimonides and Aquinas on the Study of Metaphysics," in *A Straight Path: Studies in Medieval Philosophy and Culture – Essays in Honor of Arthur Hyman*, ed. Ruth Link-Salinger (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988): 206–215.

⁸ For a more detailed discussion of other formal and substantive aspects of this unit of chapters, see Dov Schwartz, *The Many Faces of Maimonides*, trans. Batya Stein (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2018), ch. 1.

⁹ The passion for metaphysics is indeed intensified in the consciousness of the religious person who longs to know God at any cost. Unlike the classic philosopher, such as Aristotle, for whom God is one element of the system, for a religious person in the Middle Ages, God is not only an object of knowledge but the source of the revealed commandment.

The purpose of the *Guide*, as Maimonides himself attests, is to dispel speculative doubts rather than provide educational, moral, or political guidance.¹⁰ Discussing the educational conditions for the study of metaphysics is therefore seemingly superfluous. Possibly, then, Maimonides was suggesting that the speculative obstacle is sometimes due to causes that are in no way speculative. We search for errors in the realm of learning and in the material we are grappling with when the reasons for them may be psychological, ethical, and political.

Commentators and thinkers in late medieval Spain and Provence did indeed focus on the issue at the centre of these chapters – the proper attitude to metaphysics and to the “mysteries of the Torah.”¹¹ Whereas this was a momentous question for the rationalists of this era, however, modern scholarship has been more interested in other topics in Maimonidean thought.

The limits of apprehension

The first stage (chapters 31–32) of Maimonides’ discussion on the proper approach to the study of metaphysics is negative: the boundaries of the human intellect are impassable and ignored at one’s peril. Maimonides clarifies the principles of this stage through a parallel between the cognitive and physical planes, as detailed below.

Hierarchy

Chapter 31 deals with three types of hindrances to the apprehension of metaphysics, ranked by order of importance:

1. Apprehension and cognition: Maimonides writes about the limits of cognition based on an analogy to sensory perception: as the senses are limited in their ability, so is cognition. He also points to individual differences regarding the powers of apprehension: “There are great differences in capacity between the individuals of the species. [...] It may thus happen that whereas one individual discovers a certain notion by himself through his speculation, another individual

¹⁰ Moses Maimonides, “Epistle Dedicatory,” in *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), I:31, 3–4. All further English citations are from this translation (henceforth *Guide*). The Judeo-Arabic original is from *Dalālat al-Ha’irīn*, ed. Salomon Munk and Isachar. Yoel (Jerusalem: Yunovits, 1931) (henceforth Munk and Yoel).

¹¹ See Dov Schwartz, *Contradiction and Concealment in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2002), 218–257 [Heb]. Maimonides prescribed a rigorous order of study, beginning with logic and culminating in metaphysics (221–222).

is not able ever to understand that notion.”¹² Lack of awareness as to the limits of metaphysics precludes its apprehension.

2. Will and longing (moral). The element of passion [*shawq*], which will prove to be a leitmotif of the entire unit, appears here for the first time. Maimonides assumed that, by nature, humans are endowed with a passion for apprehension. “There are things for the apprehension of which man will find that he has a great longing.”¹³ The sway of the intellect endeavouring to seek for, and to investigate, their true reality exists at every time and in every group of men engaged in speculation.”¹⁴ This longing, however, interferes with metaphysical apprehension, because zest leads to carelessness and to the omission of the distinction between proven, plausible, and erroneous assumptions.¹⁵
3. Controversy (political and social): the longing for metaphysics leads to disagreements: With regard to such things there is a multiplicity of opinions, disagreement arises between the men engaged in speculation, and doubts crop up; all this because the intellect is attached to an apprehension of these things, I mean to say because of its longing [*shawq*] for them; and also because everyone thinks that he has found a way by means of which he will know the true reality of the matter.¹⁶

12 *Guide* I:31, 65. Maimonides used *'idrāk* in this chapter to denote apprehension (Munk and Yoel 44, 8). See Shlomo Pines, “The Limitations of Human Knowledge according to Al-Fārābī, ibn Bajja, and Maimonides,” in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, vol. 2, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979): 100–104.

13 “[...] *shawkahu 'ila 'idrākihā 'azīma*” (Munk and Yoel, 44.18). Al-Ghazali mentions that apprehension (*'idrāk*) is the motive for love, and therefore precedes it. See the analysis of Binyamin Abrahamov, *Divine Love in Islamic Mysticism: The Teachings of al-Ghazali and al-Dabbagh* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 44. On the possible influence of al-Ghazali on Maimonides on this issue, see Steven Harvey, “The Meaning of Terms Designating Love in Judeo-Arabic Thought and Some Remarks on the Judeo-Arabic Interpretation of Maimonides,” in *Judaeo-Arabic Studies: Proceedings of the Founding Conference of the Society for Jewish-Arabic Studies [Chicago, May 1984]*, ed. Norman Golb (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997): 175–196, 188. Unlike al-Ghazali, Maimonides discussed love or longing as preceding apprehension rather than ensuing from it.

14 *Guide* I:31, 66. In chapter 34 (beginning of the third cause, 73–74), Maimonides lists the “things” that a person desires to know. See below.

15 In the “Epistle Dedicatory,” Maimonides mentioned that R. Joseph had a “strong desire” (*hirs*) and a “powerful longing” (*'ishtiyyāq*) for speculative matters and a “longing” (*shawq*) for mathematics (*Epistles*, ed. Baneth, 7–8; *Guide*, 3). Maimonides, however, mentions that Joseph had channelled his longing in positive ways. He further writes that he had studied with Joseph “the science of astronomy,” and before that “the art of logic.” Joseph, then, did not apply his longing to metaphysics but channelled it solely to the preliminary sciences. Maimonides therefore held that Joseph was capable of learning “the secrets of the prophetic books” (i.e., metaphysics), and, to some degree, physics as well. Already in the “Epistle Dedicatory,” then, Maimonides had clearly hinted at the centrality of passion.

16 *Guide* I:31, 66.

Maimonides cites the three causes of disagreement set forth by Alexander of Aphrodisias – the inclination to dominate, the complexity of the object of apprehension, and the limitations of the one apprehending¹⁷; to this list of causes he added a fourth: habit.

After explicitly stating that the multiplicity of opinions and disagreements follow from the passion for metaphysics, Maimonides creates a hierarchy here too: “The things about which there is this perplexity are very numerous in divine matters [metaphysics], few in matters pertaining to natural science, and non-existent in matters pertaining to mathematics.”¹⁸ The human urge to know leads to disagreements in almost every realm, but metaphysical curiosity is exceptional due to its intensity and to the impossibility of adducing absolute proof for some or most of its arguments.

The mainstay in the hierarchy created by Maimonides is thus the passion for the metaphysical, a notion that introduces emotional concepts into abstract speculative apprehension.¹⁹ Maimonides knew that, by slipping into the moral and educational sphere, he differed from Aristotelian philosophy, which had hardly devoted attention to personality and to psychological preparation for the study of metaphysics. Maimonides, therefore, summed up chapter 31 with a declaration:

Do not think that what we have said with regard to the insufficiency of the human intellect and its having a limit at which it stops is a statement made in order to conform to Law. For it is something that has already been said and truly grasped by the philosophers without their having concern for a particular doctrine or opinion.²⁰

Maimonides admitted that the limitation of apprehension is perceived as a “natural” characteristic of the *shari’a*,²¹ which Ibn Tibbon and al-Harizi translate as “Torah” and Pines as “Law.”

Aristotle considered how the influence of what is said depends on the listener’s conduct (ἡθῆ) and habits (νεμεσώτε).²² In other words, he related to preconceptions, and particularly to the willingness of individuals to internalize information in accordance with their nature. Aristotle clarified that some are impressed by mathematical precision and others by a poetic style. He distinguished between

¹⁷ Here too, Maimonides uses the terminology of love: the first cause of the disagreement is “love [*hubb*] of domination and love of strife” (*Guide*, 66; Munk and Yoel, 44.30).

¹⁸ *Guide* I:31, 66.

¹⁹ I am referring to *ladhdha*. See Dov Schwartz, “Avicenna and Maimonides on Immortality: A Comparative Study,” in *Medieval and Modern Perspectives on Muslim-Jewish Relations*, ed. Ronald L. Nettler (Chur: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995): 185–197.

²⁰ *Guide* I:31, 67.

²¹ Munk and Yoel, 45.18. See, for example, Joel Kraemer, “*Shari’a* and *Nomos* in the Philosophical Thought of Maimonides,” *Te’uda: Studies in Judaica*, 6 (1986): 183–202 [Heb].

²² Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, trans. Hugh Tredennick, II, 3, 995a (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947), 94–95.

the methods of the natural sciences, such as physics, and the study of immaterial substances (μη ἔχουσιν ὕλην). These statements follow a discussion of the four causes (material, formal, efficient, final), in time and in infinity. In late medieval discourse, non-material entities became “divine things.” Thinkers active in the religious world, then, incorporated metaphysics into the discussion on the limits of apprehension.

Aristotle did not specifically refer to a passion for metaphysics. This passion assumed significance mainly in the religious sphere, even though Maimonides did not think of it as necessarily religious but rather as a typical human characteristic, as shown below. In any event, Maimonides interpreted Aristotle as strongly supporting the notion of the risk entailed by the study of metaphysics or, alternatively, the caution required by this endeavour. He implied that religious laws are the first and immediate source in a suitable preparation for metaphysics and that philosophers also advocate the need for such preparation, namely, educational and ethical preparation. The passion for metaphysics thus re-emerges as a built-in component of the religious philosopher's existence.

Harm

Maimonides painstakingly emphasized the damage resulting from the improper study of metaphysics, focusing on two topics showing the harm of uncontrolled passion.

The first is the theory of the intellect. Occasionally, Maimonides drew a parallel between soul and intellect v. body and matter. In chapter 31, he used this parallel to clarify the boundaries of cognition, and in chapter 32 – to explore the harm that ensues from attempts to cross them, illustrating this parallel through the sense of sight – if we attempt to see beyond our ability, we harm our sight generally: “A similar discovery is made by everyone engaging in the speculative study of some science [*ilm mā*] with respect to his state of reflection [*al-tafakkur*]. [...] For the condition of all bodily faculties [*al-quwa al-badaniyya kullahā*] is, in this respect, one and the same.”²³

The intellect features in this passage as one of the “bodily faculties.” Maimonides did not hold that the material intellect is a force in the body. The material intellect is obviously connected, in a way that remained controversial, to some physical faculty (imagination, the soul as a whole, and the like). The intellect per se, however, is a potential, and is therefore described in philosophical terminology as “intellect *in potentia*” or “hylic intellect.” But as soon as the intellect has acted, through the thought process, to transform the imagined forms into intellectual forms (intelligibles), it is certainly not a physical faculty. At times, the material intellect is said to be

²³ Guide I:32, 68. For parallels in Maimonides' writings, see Herbert A. Davidson, *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 343–344.

a “faculty,”²⁴ and at times it is juxtaposed to “matter” or “body.”²⁵ The connection of the material intellect to physical faculties was usually defined as a “connection of existence” rather than one of “admixture” precisely because the material intellect is not mixed with the soul’s material faculties.

In the passage cited, Maimonides explicitly referred to those “engaging in speculative study.” He attempted to temper the problematic of including thought among the physical faculties by using the term *fikra* that, usually, denotes the capability of the practical intellect.²⁶ The context, however, is unmistakable: Maimonides referred to the acquisition of speculative knowledge (“some science”), but included the intellect among the “bodily faculties.” It is on these grounds, I hold, that he ended the chapter with an outright declaration: “Do not criticize the terms applied to the intellect in this chapter and others. For the purpose here is to guide towards the intended notion and not to investigate the truth of the essence of the intellect; for other chapters are devoted to a precise account of this subject.”²⁷ His inclusion of the intellect among the “bodily faculties” was thus intentional.²⁸ This is one of the places in the *Guide* where Maimonides explicitly makes a declaration about the literary style of the work: an educational message at the expense of philosophical precision. The discerning reader, who understands “the truth of the essence of the intellect,” knows this to be imprecise, while the ordinary reader, inferring from the physical realm, will perceive a real danger here and grasp that the passion for metaphysics comes at a price and inflicts severe harm.

24 In both the senses of psychological faculty and potential. In his *Short Commentary on De Anima*, Averroes calls the potential of the hylic intellect “the faculty within him” (Moses of Narbonne, *Ma’amar bi-Shlemut ha-Nefesh (Treatise on the Perfection of the Soul)*, ed. Alfred L. Ivry [Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1977], 120, 12 [Heb]). Maimonides himself did not endorse an unequivocal stance on the identification of the material intellect. Moses of Narbonne, for example, argued that his approach was that the intellect is a disposition (*Ma’amar bi-Shelemut ha-Nefesh*, 123, 226–227).

25 In Averroes’ formulation. See, for example, Gitit Holzman, *The Theory of the Intellect and Soul in the Thought of Rabbi Moshe Narboni Based on His Commentaries on the Writings of Ibn Rushd, Ibn Tufayl, Ibn Bajja and Al-Ghazali* (PhD diss.: Hebrew University, 1996), 45 [Heb].

26 See Avraham Nuriel, *Concealed and Revealed in Medieval Philosophy* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2000), 144 [Heb].

27 *Guide* I:32, 70. Nowhere in his writings does Maimonides actually devote a methodical discussion to the concept of the material intellect; he refers to it only incidentally.

28 Nevertheless, fourteenth- and fifteenth-century commentators base this Maimonidean statement on the parallel between sensory and intellectual perception. According to Efodi, Asher Crescas, and Shem Tov b. Joseph, at the stage of the intellect’s realization – *intellect in habitu* – its apprehension, unlike that of the senses, is not limited. Commentators ascribed to Maimonides the possibility of metaphysical knowledge, an issue that has been discussed at length. See, for example, Pines, “The Limitations of Human Knowledge,” 82–102; Herbert A. Davidson, “Maimonides on Metaphysical Knowledge,” *Maimonidean Studies* 3 (1992/1993): 49–103. Maimonides’ primary intent was seemingly to define the potential intellect, and not necessarily the parallel he indicated.

The mysteries of the rabbis

The second topic showing the harm of uncontrolled passion is the error dichotomy. Beginning with chapter 32, the Talmudic texts dealing with *ma'aseh merkavah* serve Maimonides as an authoritative source on the risks and harms confronting the student of metaphysics. In many respects, the passion for metaphysics can be seen as a hermeneutical key to Talmudic esotericism.

In chapter 32, Maimonides turned to the tradition of the four who entered the *pardes*,²⁹ which he explains in relation to the harm of studying metaphysics without the proper preparation.³⁰ This tradition points to degrees of harm: Ben Azzai gazed and died, Ben Zoma gazed and was stricken,³¹ and Elisha ben Abuyah became an apostate. Maimonides, by contrast, disregarded this “hierarchy” of mistakes and harms, electing instead to offer a dichotomy: Rabbi Akiva, who entered unscathed and emerged unscathed, is contrasted with Elisha ben Abuyah, who lost his faith.³² We may assume that Maimonides, who related to the conceptual statements of the *geonim* as an independent philosophical school,³³ was familiar with at least some of their discussions on the punishment of Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma. R. Hai Gaon, for example, wrote:

Regarding what they taught, that Ben Azzai gazed and died, it was because his time to leave the world had come. Regarding what they taught, that Ben Zoma gazed and was stricken, they meant by “stricken” [*nifg`a*] that he became deranged by the distressing sights that his mind could not bear, resembling the Psalm against plagues [*pega`im*], “dwells in the secret place of the most High.”³⁴

According to Hayya Gaon, the harm had focused on Ben Zoma’s “mind.” In *The Kuzari*, R. Judah Halevi also comments on this hierarchy of Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma. He avoided precise identification of the two by name, not only because of the differences

²⁹ Tosefta Hagigah 2:3; PT Hagigah 2:1, 77b; BT Hagigah 14b, and more.

³⁰ I will offer only a brief comment on a matter that I will not be expanding upon here. Maimonides presented the narrative of the four who entered *pardes* in the sequence of chapters dealing with the preparation for metaphysics, and R. Akiva is depicted as someone who had studied metaphysics (“divine matters”) and succeeded in this endeavour. In *Guide* II:30 (353), however, Maimonides implies that R. Akiva had dealt only with meteorology, not with the world of the spheres, and definitely not with the separate intellects. On R. Akiva’s apprehension in Maimonides’ discussion of creation, see, e.g., Sara Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides’ Interpretation of the Story of Creation* (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1987), 163–164 [Heb]. This tension could project onto the nature of Maimonidean esotericism concerning the possibility of acquiring metaphysical knowledge.

³¹ In the parable of the palace (*Guide* III:51, 618–619), Maimonides referred to the status of Ben Zoma as one of those who “is still outside.” That is, Ben Zoma had not mastered physics, but only the mathematical sciences. We can thereby understand Ben Zoma’s error: he had attempted to study metaphysics without knowledge of physics.

³² See Kellner, *Maimonides’ Confrontation with Mysticism*, 55–56.

³³ *Guide* I:71.

³⁴ Psalms 91:10; PT Eruvin 10:11, 26c; BT Shevuot 15b.

between versions but also to clarify that there is a hierarchy here. He writes: “The one who died [Ben Azzai] was unable to bear the glance of the higher world, and his body collapsed. The second [Ben Zoma] lost his mind and whispered divine frenzy without benefiting mankind.”³⁵ The hierarchy of error and harm from Ben Azzai to Elisha ben Abuyah thus became a tradition.³⁶ Maimonides presented this dichotomy in the style of a personal address, preaching to the reader:

For if you stay your progress because of a dubious point; if you do not deceive yourself into believing that there is a demonstration with regard to matters that have not been demonstrated; if you do not hasten to reject and categorically to pronounce false any assertions whose contradictories have not been demonstrated; if, finally, you do not aspire to apprehend [*idrāk*] that which you are unable to apprehend – you will have achieved human perfection and attained the rank of Rabbi Aqiba, peace be on him [...] If, on the other hand, you aspire to apprehend things that are beyond your apprehension; or if you hasten to pronounce false, assertions the contradictories of which have not been demonstrated or that are possible, though very remotely so – you will have joined Elisha Aher. That is, you will not only not be perfect, but will be the most deficient among the deficient; and it shall so fall out that you will be overcome by imaginings [*al-khiyālāt*] and by an inclination toward things defective, evil, and wicked – this resulting from the intellect’s being preoccupied and its light’s being extinguished [...] In this regard it is said: “Hast thou found honey? Eat so much as is sufficient for thee, lest thou be filled therewith and vomit it” [Proverbs 25:16]. In a similar way, the sages, may their memory be blessed, used this verse as a parable that they applied to Elisha Aher. How marvellous is this parable.³⁷

Maimonides feared the passion for metaphysics so intensely that he dismissed any gradations of error and harm. He therefore excluded Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma from his discussion, and rejected the ranking of their errors as less serious – anyone who intends to engage in metaphysics without the proper preparation must take into account the possibility of the worst scenario, symbolized by Elisha ben Abuyah.³⁸

Elisha ben Abuyah is thus the classic model of one who sought to cross the boundaries of apprehension and suffered the greatest harm. Maimonides, as noted, chose to ignore “partial” damages. He presented, on the one hand, R. Akiva, who followed the proper instructions for studying metaphysics and successfully overcame

³⁵ Judah Halevi, *The Kuzari*, trans. Hartwig Hirschfeld (New York: Schocken, 1964), 3:65, 190. See Diana Lobel, *Between Mysticism and Philosophy: Sufi Language of Religious Experience in Judah Ha-Levi’s Kuzari* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 117–118.

³⁶ See Abraham ibn Daud, *Das Buch Emunah Ramah, oder Der Erhabene Glaube*, trans. Simson Weil (Frankfurt am Main: Druck, 1852), 2, 75.

³⁷ *Guide* I:32, 68–69.

³⁸ See Diamond, “Failed Theodicy.” What is striking is that, though Maimonides excluded Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma from the ranking, his interpreters struggled to restore them. For instance, see the commentaries of R. Moses ben Joshua of Narbonne and of R. Mordecai Comitiyano, who wrote a paraphrase on R. Moses of Narbonne. Both referenced *Guide* I:31, and adapted the story of the four who entered the *pardes* to the four causes of disagreement. See *Commentary on the Guide of the Perplexed*, ed. Dov Schwartz and Esty Eisenmann (eds.) (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2016), 88.

the threatening hurdle and, on the other, Elisha ben Abuyah, who broke the rules and lapsed into the worst of all.

The primary impulse

Maimonides worried about unrestrained study patterns, not only in their method and fields of knowledge but also in their disregard of the proper order. He devoted two chapters (33–34) to cool the ardour for metaphysics and, in chapter 33, explained that metaphysics should not be the opening subject. He went beyond the proscription, however, and prescribed the proper course of study.

The literary structure

In chapters 31 to 32, Maimonides deals with the limits of cognition. The sole educational prescription in these chapters is to overcome the longing to cross these limits. Chapters 33 to 35 determine that metaphysics is not to be studied without first studying the preceding sciences in the correct order. What, then, is the relationship between chapters 33 to 35 and chapters 31 to 32? Two answers are possible. One is that chapters 33 to 35 add information about the proper way of engaging in metaphysics, conveying the exoteric level and suggesting that the literary structure conceals no other messages. The other is that chapters 33 to 35 refine more precisely the message of chapters 31 to 32, defining in precise terms the harm that results from crossing the boundaries of cognition.

1. Driven by their passion for metaphysics, people fail to follow the proper order and begin their study with it and are consequently harmed.
2. The multitude is incapable of engaging in metaphysics and the order of study is therefore not relevant to it.
3. The multitude still longs for metaphysics, however, and should be the object of a special dogmatic “metaphysical” education.
4. The individual may engage in metaphysics according to the study method set forth by Maimonides.

The central emphasis, then, is political. If chapters 33 to 35 define chapters 31 to 32 more precisely, quite a radical conclusion emerges, suited to the political dimension of Maimonidean esotericism. According to this alternative, the limits of apprehension set in chapter 31 had related to the multitude to begin with, since only simple people would attempt to engage in metaphysics without scientific foundation. Maimonides, then, seems to have adopted a technique of concealment, with Chapter 32 intended to obscure the key role of the political factor in this unit of chapters.

Covertly, these messages are intended for the intellectual to attain control of a multitude driven by zeal and passion by supplying it with basic beliefs, such as the negation of anthropomorphism.

Indirectly, Maimonides explained yet again that the passion for metaphysics leads to the urge to begin with it. Underlying the failure of those longing for this pursuit, then, is a personality flaw. Maimonides diverted the discussion from the methodological, didactic, and educational realm to the emotional and the political.

Artifice

In chapter 33, Maimonides describes the proper approach to the study of metaphysics by means of a parable: feeding an infant who has not been weaned foods that are difficult to digest (such as bread, meat, and wine)³⁹:

Similarly these true opinions were not hidden, enclosed in riddles, and treated by all men of knowledge with all sorts of artifice [*tahayyul*]⁴⁰ through which they could teach them without expounding them explicitly, because of something bad being hidden in them, or because they undermine the foundations of Law, as is thought by ignorant people who deem that they have attained a rank suitable for speculation. Rather have they been hidden because at the outset the intellect is incapable of receiving them; only flashes of them are made to appear so that the perfect man should know them. On this account they are called “secrets” and “mysteries of the Torah,” as we shall make clear.⁴¹

The proper study of metaphysics, then, relies on two principles: an esoteric language (“hidden,” “riddles”) and artifice. The esoteric language enables gradual study and the riddles restrain the student by releasing knowledge bit by bit, contrary to systematic explanation. The artifices enable proper faith during the lengthy process of exploration. Students attain perfection gradually and, at each step, create metaphors and distinctions that are not entirely true but are suited to their level. This level, however,

39 This parable highlights the central role of the eating motif in this unit. It also links the unit to the preceding chapter, chapter 30, which deals with the many denotations of “eat” (*akhol*) and also to the conclusion of chapter 34, where it is mentioned again. In chapter 30, Maimonides emphasizes that eating has a destructive sense, “the destruction and disappearance of the thing eaten, I mean the corruption of its form that first takes place” (*Guide*, 63). He accordingly cites a series of Scriptural sources supporting the meaning of harm, cessation, and the collapse of matter into its components. The second denotation is that of wisdom and intellective apprehension. This chapter prepares the reader of the unit for the fact that the concern with metaphysics can be destructive on the one hand, and the summit of human apprehension on the other. The reader understands that engaging in the metaphysical means walking a tightrope requiring detailed preparations that include science, moral attributes, and tradition.

40 See Eran, “Artifice,” 109–131.

41 *Guide* I:33, 71. See Eran, “Artifice,” 111 n. 10, 120–121.

changes with increasing knowledge. Between the lines, Maimonides poses the question: how to understand the role of the artifice for the perfect man? The artifice is more easily comprehensible when it pertains to the broad public, and Maimonides shifts from the individual to the multitude,⁴² which lives with the artifice at the minimal, rough level. The artifice implies using metaphysical and theological concepts without understanding their content, and certainly without verifying them by recourse to evidence. In various topics in the *Guide*, Maimonides explicitly or implicitly explained that politics is an inherent requirement for the study of the sciences.⁴³ A person who adopts the proper habits, and certainly one leading the public, will ultimately also acquire the proper way to study metaphysics.

Maimonides added a necessary condition – the student must be “sagacious by nature.”⁴⁴ He thereby made the study of metaphysics dependent on human nature. In chapters 31 to 32, then, Maimonides presented the general principle, that is, the boundaries of apprehension and the need for cautious study without illusions, and in chapter 33 he clarified the method of study.

Eros and politics

In chapter 34, the longest in the unit, we find two parallel movements bringing together substantive, hermeneutical, and literary motifs. One movement likens the longing for metaphysics to sexual desire, possibly continuing and even formulating in great detail the rules set in chapters 31 to 32 comparing the physical and intellectual

⁴² This move is reminiscent of Plato's parable of the larger and smaller letters in *The Republic*, one version of which Maimonides might have learned from *The Kuzari* (the *hasid* as ruler at the beginning of Book Three). On the possible influence of *The Kuzari* on the *Guide*, see *Guide*, “Translator's Introduction,” cxxxiii; Howard Kreisel, “Judah Halevi's Influence on Maimonides: A Preliminary Appraisal,” *Maimonidean Studies* 2 (1991): 95–121; Dov Schwartz, “The Figure of Judah Halevi as Emerging from Maimonides' *Guide*,” *Daat* 61 (2007): 23–40 [Heb]. See also Isaac Shilat, *Between the Kuzari and Maimonides* (Maale Adumim: Shilat, 2011) [Heb].

⁴³ See, for example, *Guide* I:54, and see below.

⁴⁴ *Guide* I:33, 72. In the original, *dhakiyy al-ṭabā'i'* (Munk and Yoel, 48.24). R. Kafih rendered this in Hebrew as *teva'im zakim* (pure natures). Maimonides also used this phrase in the Introduction to his *Commentary to the Mishnah*, where the Hebrew translation is *harif ha-teva* (*Maimonides' Introductions to the Mishnah*, ed. Isaac Shilat [Jerusalem: Ma'aliyot, 1992], 54 [Heb]). In the Hebrew translation of *The Guide of the Perplexed* by Michael Schwarz (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2002), he also translated *harif me-tiv'o*. Indeed, *dhakiyy* usually means cleverness. This term appears also in chapter 34 (78): “natural perspicacity and understanding.” Klein-Braslavy, *King Solomon*, 94–95, interpreted this term as relating entirely to the cognitive realm. The Maimonidean use of *teva* (nature) extends to psychological traits as well. See, for example, Isadore Twersky, “Halakha and Science: Perspectives on the Epistemology of Maimonides,” *Shenaton ha-Mishpat ha-Ivri: Annual of the Institute for Research in Jewish Law* 14–15 (1988–1989), 140–143 [Heb].

planes. The other movement presents the political implications deriving from this passion, to which Maimonides hints already at the opening: “The causes that prevent the commencement of instruction with divine science, the indication of things that ought to be indicated, and the presentation of this to the multitude, are five.”⁴⁵ The causes that prevent the preservation of order in the study of the sciences are the same causes that prevent the education of the multitude, and the political movement in chapter 34 is therefore explicit, unlike the sexual one, which is concealed.

The sexual movement

Cosmoeroticism is not unique to the Maimonidean context. Maimonides used the erotic motif to denote man’s pleasure in the uppermost stages of apprehension and of God’s presence.⁴⁶ He had already alluded to the linkage between sexual passion and the passion for metaphysics in his *Commentary to the Mishnah*: “And it is known that every man thirsts [*yashtāq*] for all the sciences, whether he is a fool or a sage.”⁴⁷ *Sharāha* means ardour or desire, while *yashtāq* means yearning and possibly longing for a loved one, but Maimonides hinted in this early work to a connection between sexual desire and the thirst for metaphysics: both are threatened by an urge that is almost uncontrollable. Maimonides’ veiled interpretation connects them due to their shared ardour. An element that had been incidental in the *Commentary to the Mishnah* thus becomes a leitmotif in the *Guide*.

In *Guide* I:34, as noted, Maimonides lists five reasons for not beginning one’s course of study with metaphysics. The text leads us from association to direct focus, and from allusion to explicit discussion. Sexuality is at most hinted in the first cause and concealed in the second. In the third cause, however, it appears openly, and even more intensely in the fourth and the fifth.

The first cause relates to the complexity and profundity of metaphysics, and Maimonides uses a parable: “One of the parables generally known in our community is that likening knowledge to water,”⁴⁸ when knowledge is usually assumed to refer to Talmudic literature.

⁴⁵ *Guide* I:34, 72. Beginning one’s studies with metaphysics means violating the principle of the sciences’ order. See, for example, what Efodi writes: “That is, the causes that prevent a person from beginning, at the start of his study, with metaphysics” (*Sefer Moreh Nevukhim im [...] Perushim*, fol. 52b).

⁴⁶ See Harvey, “Meaning of Terms.” The features of Adam are also part of the degrees of perfection. See, for example, Moshe Idel, “*Sitre `Arayot* in Maimonides’ Thought,” in *Maimonides and Philosophy*, ed. Shlomo Pines and Yirmiyahu Yovel (Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1986): 79–91; Warren Z. Harvey, “Sex and Health in Maimonides,” in *Moses Maimonides: Physician, Scientist, and Philosopher*, ed. Fred Rosner and Samuel Kottke (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1993): 36–37.

⁴⁷ *Commentary to the Mishnah*, 377.

⁴⁸ *Guide* I:34, 72–73.

The second cause “is the insufficiency of the minds of all men at their beginnings [...] for perfection exists in him only potentially, and in his beginnings he lacks this act.”⁴⁹ Maimonides highlighted material hindrances and returned the discussion to the sensual and social plane. In his mention of the harlot image in the Introduction to the *Guide*, Maimonides used a similar formulation to speak of the material obstacles to perfection.⁵⁰ In *Guide* I:54, Maimonides argued that the “abominations” of the Canaanite nations were “the obstacles impeding the achievement of the perfection [ta’ūq ‘an al-kamāl],”⁵¹ and in *Guide* III:37, he identified the “abominations” with unnatural kinds of sexual intercourse.⁵²

The erotic allusions discernible in the material hindrances to intellectual perfection are wholly channelled to human nature in the third cause, with sexual tension slowly shifting from a concealed hint to a hesitant and cautious explicitness. This cause focuses on the acquisition of the preliminary sciences (logic, the mathematical sciences, and physics) required for the study of metaphysics, while “man has in his nature a desire [tashawwuq] to seek the ends; and he often finds preliminaries tedious and refuses to engage in them.”⁵³ In the philosophical literature, the term “shawq” also appears in the context of a lover’s desire for the object of his love.⁵⁴

Maimonides held that the longing to acquire comprehensive knowledge of God, the universe, and the soul is inherent in human nature per se, independent of the person’s intellectual capability. This principle appears already in his *Commentary to the Mishnah* – “And it is known that every man by his nature thirsts [yashtāq] for all the sciences, whether he is a fool or a sage”⁵⁵ – and in the *Guide*:

Now if you would awaken a man – even though he were the dumbest of all people – as one awakens a sleeping individual, and if you were to ask him whether he desired [tashtāq] at that moment to have knowledge [...] he would wish this desire to be allayed, and the knowledge of all this to be achieved by means of one or two words that you would say to him.⁵⁶

49 *Guide* I:34, 73. This argument as well, that wisdom requires time, appears in another context in Saadia’s introduction to *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948). Saadia discussed the need for revelation in light of the fact that the intellect is capable of reaching the truth, and stated that “the conclusions reached by means of the art of speculation could be attained only in the course of a certain measure of time” (*Beliefs and Opinions*, 31).

50 “For all the hindrances keeping man from his ultimate perfection [al-‘uqūl al-mufāraqa], every deficiency affecting him and every disobedience, come to him from his matter alone” (*Guide*, Introduction to the First Part, 13; Munk and Joel, 9.1).

51 *Guide* I:54, 127; Munk and Joel 86.16.

52 *Guide* III:57, 548.

53 *Guide* I:34, 73.

54 For example, in al-Ghazali. See Abrahamov, *Divine Love*, 75. See above.

55 *Commentary to the Mishnah*. The original Judeo-Arabic appears in the Kafih ed., 377.

56 *Guide* I:34, 73–74.

Maimonides is actually articulating a theory about the psychology of curiosity, stating that humans have a desire for knowledge of the cosmic structure (Heaven, the movers – meaning the angels or separate intellects – and the soul), the beginnings (the creation of the world and the soul), and the final causes. Maimonides himself translated *shawq* as *ta'avah* (desire), quoting Scripture accordingly.⁵⁷

In Scripture, the word *ta'avah* does not usually appear in a sexual context. Whereas in Amoraic and Tannaitic literature the term is infused with a certain dimension of sexuality and expounded derogatorily,⁵⁸ its use in a sexual context became widespread in the Middle Ages. Maimonides called man's longing for knowledge *ta'avah* and included many hints for understanding the mental mechanism of longing for science by way of sexuality.

In the fourth cause, sexuality becomes an explicit argument. This cause focuses on the proper foundation, physical and moral, for the study of metaphysics – a congenial temperament and moral attributes. Maimonides argues in *Eight Chapters*, his introduction to Tractate Avot, that every moral attribute ensues from a natural disposition, exemplifying three of these dispositions in the *Guide*: anger, lust, and instability.⁵⁹ Note that the lustful are mentioned in the middle, between the angry and the unstable. Maimonides then noted that the rabbis did not teach this wisdom to the young “because of the effervescence of their natures and of their minds being occupied with the flame of growth.”⁶⁰ This fact is highly compatible with the flaw of individuals whose sexual temperament is dominant, a trait typical of the young.

Finally, the fifth cause is that “men are occupied with the necessities of the bodies.” Maimonides stressed that the concern with physical needs intensifies “if, in addition, they are occupied with taking care of a wife and of children.”⁶¹ Unequivocally, he states:

Things are so that if even a perfect man, as we have mentioned, were to occupy himself much with these necessary things and all the more if he were to occupy himself with unnecessary things, and if his desire [*shawquhu*] for them should grow strong, he would find that his theoretical desires had grown weak and had been submerged. And his demand for them would slacken and become intermittent and inattentive. He accordingly would not grasp things that otherwise would have been within his power to grasp; or else he would grasp them with a confused apprehension, a mixture of apprehension and failure to apprehend.⁶²

⁵⁷ *Guide* I:34, 76.

⁵⁸ See, for example, M. Makkot 3:15; PT Makkot 3:12, 32b; BT Hagigah 11b; BT Makkot 23b.

⁵⁹ *Guide* I:34, 77.

⁶⁰ *Guide* I:34, 77–79.

⁶¹ *Guide* I:34, 79.

⁶² *Ibid.*

Family life harms apprehension [*'idrāk*]. Maimonides, then, depicted the following process:

1. Two passions drive humans in tandem – the metaphysical desire for cosmic comprehensive knowledge and the physical desire that is particularly evident in the sexual urge and the continuation of the species. These passions are innate in both the multitude and the perfect man and inherent in their nature.
2. These two passions are constraining and mutually contradictory – the satisfaction of one comes at the expense of the other.
3. The decisive majority of people, the multitude, satisfy the physical and sexual passion, but not the speculative one.
4. Satisfaction is gradual – as one passion is satisfied, the other also wanes. The increasing dominance of physical needs sustains family life but also leads to the waning of speculative passion, beginning with its “submergence” and culminating in “a confused apprehension.” Implicitly, Maimonides sets forth a dialectic version of family life – family life balances the sexual urge but it is this balance that constrains the metaphysical drive.

According to the fifth cause for negating the beginning of one's study with metaphysics, then, the perfect man replaced sexual with metaphysical passion. This approach also explains the displays of asceticism in the *Guide* that is prominent, for example, in the chapters on prophecy.⁶³ Maimonides wanted to emphasize that metaphysical passion is a built-in universal inclination in the soul that rabbinic sayings had intended to regulate. Just as he tended to claim that the power of the Torah is that it leads different individuals to perfection in the most effective manner,⁶⁴ so did he assert that Jewish sources balance the passion for metaphysics in the most effective way.

The political movement

Like the sexual motif, the political motif is absent from the first two causes despite slight indications of its concealed presence in metaphors, texts, and a concern for the dispositions of the multitude.

In the third cause, Maimonides mentions the preliminary sciences required for the study of metaphysics.⁶⁵ In *Guide* I:54, Maimonides links the doctrine of divine

⁶³ See Aviram Ravitsky, “The Doctrine of the Mean and Asceticism: On the Uniformity of Maimonides' Ethics,” *Tarbiz* 79 (2011): 439–469 [Heb].

⁶⁴ See, e.g., “Epistle to Yemen,” in *Crisis and Leadership: Epistles of Maimonides*, trans. Abraham Halkin with discussions by David Hartman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), part IV.

⁶⁵ *Guide* I:34, 74.

attributes to political leadership.⁶⁶ The principle in this chapter and in chapter 34 is similar: knowledge of creatures, the “things He has made,” leads not only to the Creator but also to God’s ways of ruling the world. These ways, meaning the natural order,⁶⁷ are a paradigm for the ideal political regime. Many scholars have already pointed to Al-Fārābī’s thought as the source of this approach. In several of his books, Al-Fārābī opened with the cosmic leadership and then proceeded to the political one.⁶⁸ Consequently, one who wishes to study metaphysics must have knowledge of the harmonious natural order which expresses divine providence.

The principle of recourse to politics in the process of personal perfection is clearly formulated in the fourth cause in the two “natural aptitudes”: moral perfection and political perfection. Maimonides requires actual political perfection from the student of metaphysics. He interprets the merits of one to whom the mysteries of the Torah are given according to the verse in Isaiah 3:3, “a counsellor, wise in crafts, and endowed with understanding of whispering,” and according to Babylonian Talmud Hagigah 13a, as follows:

[One] may have an unerring opinion and an excellent way of conducting affairs in political matters; such a one is called “counsellor.” [...] Among men there is also found one who is naturally full of understanding and perspicacity and capable of giving concise and coherent expression to the most hidden notions. Such a one is called “endowed with understanding of whispering.” However, someone of this sort does not necessarily occupy himself with, and achieve knowledge of, the sciences. The one who actually has achieved knowledge of the sciences is called “wise in crafts.” [...] If all this is realized in someone, then “the mysteries of the Torah may be transmitted to him.”⁶⁹

Maimonides asserts that the ruler’s supreme mission is to prevent the dissemination of the mysteries of the Torah to the multitude. The superior ruler is one who is knowledgeable in science since he is the only one able to assess the risks of it for the wider public. The meaning of political perfection, that is, the leadership ability required of a student of metaphysics, can be summed up in these qualities:

1. “Counsellor”: He addresses the masses and advises them by recourse to rhetorical means that will reach their hearts.
2. “Endowed with understanding of whispering”: Conceals from the multitude what should be concealed (“hiding”).⁷⁰

⁶⁶ See Shalom Rosenberg, “And Walk in His Ways,” in *Israeli Philosophy*, ed. Moshe Hallamish and Asa Kasher (Tel Aviv: Papyrus, 1983): 72–91 [Heb].

⁶⁷ See Nuriel, *Concealed and Revealed*, 86.

⁶⁸ See Lawrence V. Berman, *Ibn Bajjah and Maimonides* (PhD diss.: Hebrew University, 1959), 19. See also idem, “Maimonides, the Disciple of Alfarabi,” *Israel Oriental Society* 4 (1974): 154–178.

⁶⁹ *Guide* I:34, 78.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

3. “Wise in crafts”: A quasi-Platonic ruler – a philosopher gifted with a talent for political leadership.⁷¹

Why is the study of metaphysics conditional on political perfection? Three answers are possible, based on Maimonides:

1. The quality of study: the study of metaphysics requires addressing God’s governance of the world and superb politics conveys this leadership.
2. The religious danger: the multitude may endanger the student of metaphysics by suspecting him of heresy. Political ability is therefore necessary.
3. The educational value: educating the multitude is particularly valuable for acquiring various sorts of artifices.

Another cause may be added. The passion for metaphysics, as noted, could inflict grievous harm on the student. Self-control ensuing from moral perfection is meant to balance this passion. Possibly, a leadership position and responsibility for the public balance this passion and brings it under control, a presumption supported by Maimonides’ return to passion immediately after he formulated the need for political perfection.⁷² This cause, as noted, returns the reader to the physical realm and its ending ties political skill to self-restraint.

Just as sexual tension is relieved in the fifth cause through family life (“taking care of a wife and children”), so is political tension. Maimonides had emphasized at the beginning of the third cause that the passion for metaphysics is the lot of humans as such, and the multitude, therefore, suffers from it as well. Concern with bodily needs is thus meant to keep the multitude away from the premature and risky pursuit of metaphysics.

Political leadership and dogma

Maimonides uses chapter 35 to balance the harsh picture he had painted in the preceding chapters in the unit. The earlier chapters showed the dangers posed by the inherent passion for metaphysics and the consequent need to distance the multitude from this desire. A misleading picture might emerge, however, stating that metaphysical truths regarding the divine and its relation to reality should not be imparted at all to the multitude. Yet, aware that the desire for metaphysics in the multitude (as in the intellectual) is so strong, Maimonides addressed the need to regulate it by providing it with a number of basic truths that will assuage the fervent zeal for comprehensive knowledge. In chapter 35, therefore, Maimonides presented several lists of principles

⁷¹ *Guide* I:34, 93–101.

⁷² *Guide* I:34, 78–79.

or key fundamental assumptions, letting the reader work out their mutual relationships. To these lists, Maimonides added one intended specifically for those to whom the mysteries of the Torah are revealed. The result is a dogmatic mosaic requiring explanation.

Lists for the multitude

Maimonides earmarked three lists for the broad public and one for intellectuals, to whom the secrets and mysteries of Torah are revealed. These lists contain fundamental assumptions about the divine and its relationship with the world, some of which can easily be formulated as an article of faith, and some as fundamental metaphysical truths.⁷³ Maimonides included in his lists different conceptual elements and principles at various levels of abstraction. Since he is speaking of the multitude, he probably intended different types of audiences, as shown below.

The three lists are presented in the next table, where the differences between them are easily evident:

Dogma	First list	Second list	Third list
Supreme Being		X	
One	X		X
None but He should be worshiped	X		X
Non-corporeality	X	X	X
Not a force in the body		X	
Homonymy in divine attributes (including existence)	X		
No deficiencies		X	
No affections		X	
Eternity			X

An analysis of this table enables us to make up a list of political and educational rules that will guide the perfect man's approach to the metaphysical needs of the multitude:

1. The negation of God's corporeality, an ironclad principle that rulers must impose in every community, recurs in all three lists.⁷⁴
2. The two dogmas that follow are the unity of God and God as the sole object of worship, which are mentioned in two lists.

⁷³ The list appears in *Guide* I:35, 79–81. Cf. Arthur Hyman, "Maimonides' Thirteen Principles," in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967): 134–136.

⁷⁴ See Harry A. Wolfson, "Maimonides on the Unity and Incorporeality of God," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 56 (1965–1966): 112–136, 129.

3. The other beliefs are presumably imparted by the ruler according to the public and the specific situation. For example: according to (1), the denial of divine corporeality is necessary, but the development of this conception, such as that God is not a force within the body either, is subject to the ruler's perception of the public facing him.
4. Eternity hints at creation since it denotes God's relation to the world, that is, that God preceded it.⁷⁵ These lists clearly indicate that Maimonides did not view this as a cardinal issue, but one to be decided by the ruler.

The negation of corporeality denotes the difference between Maimonides' Muslim sources and his own approach. These political-philosophical sources would have the multitude accepting biblical and Quranic writings literally, so as to fulfil religious commandments out of fear of divine retribution. Maimonides, by contrast, held that the multitude can be educated to negate corporeality, that is, to go beyond the Scriptures' literal meaning. He advocated, as noted, an educational approach that does not ignore the multitude's needs. Concerning corporeality, he maintained that the simple person transcends the anthropomorphic images of the sources. Despite the risks entailed by metaphysical truths, the ideal ruler provides a modicum of such truths to the multitude, given its passion for metaphysics. Implicit in the way of the ruler imparting the negation of corporeality, for example, is a movement of restraint, hiddenness, and concealment, yet also some openness, attentive to and fulfilling the simple person's needs. The basic truths play a cathartic role in the education of the multitude, while also serving as a means of control by the ideal ruler.

A list for the intellectual

In the lists of the principles given to the multitude, Maimonides included a list of the esoteric matters fit only for the perfect individual, which is actually a microcosm of the *Guide* as a whole:

As for the discussion concerning attributes and the way they should be negated with regard to Him; and as for the meaning of the attributes that may be ascribed to Him, as well as the discussion concerning His creation of that which He created, the character of His governance of the world, the "how" of His providence with respect to what is other than He, the notion of His will, His apprehension, and His knowledge of all that He knows; and likewise as for the notion of prophecy and the "how" of its various degrees, and the notion of His names, though they are many, being indicative of one and the same thing – it should be considered that all these are obscure matters. In fact, they are truly "the mysteries of the Torah."⁷⁶

⁷⁵ See Menachem M. Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought: From Maimonides to Abravanel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 50–51.

⁷⁶ *Guide* I:35, 80.

If we consider the order of the items in this list, we will find in them not only allusions to the main topics of the *Guide* but also to the structure of the entire work, in an unconventional fashion:

1. Divine attributes (Part I).
2. Creation (Part II).
3. Divine government, Providence, and divine knowledge (Part III).⁷⁷
4. Prophecy (Part II).
5. Divine names (Part I).⁷⁸

The chiasmic structure of the “mysteries of the Torah,” according to the *Guide*’s parts, is I-II-III-II-I, and we can hardly assume it is random. Maimonides obviously wanted to challenge the discerning reader by clarifying that these are “the matters that ought not to be spoken of except in ‘chapter headings.’”⁷⁹ He thus presented some of these issues out of order on the one hand and, on the other, set them forth in a deliberate chiasmic structure, clearly showing that the *Guide* was written with the aim of exploring the “mysteries of the Torah.”⁸⁰

It is evident from this list that, in the “mysteries of the Torah,” Maimonides went beyond metaphysics and delved into theological questions as well. It is equally evident, however, that metaphysics is the basis for the mysteries of the Torah. Maimonides’ list begins with the divine attributes and ends with the names of God, all patently metaphysical matters (the latter expressing metaphysics’ hermeneutical implications). Chapter 35, then, concludes the discussion on the study of metaphysics by determining that metaphysics is the foundation of the “mysteries of the Torah.” Maimonides appears to have drawn an analogy here: just as the sciences are a preparation for the study of metaphysics, so, too, metaphysics is a preparation for the “mysteries of the Torah.” The analogy extends to the realm of politics as well: just as the multitude must be kept away from metaphysics then, even more so, they must be kept away from the “mysteries of the Torah.” The elitism characteristic of Maimonidean rationalism is expressed precisely in what is common to the multitude and the perfect man – the passion for metaphysics. The perfect man, however, is expected to overcome this urge, learn cautiously, and then proceed to acquire the “mysteries

⁷⁷ Entering the question of the *Guide*’s general structure exceeds my scope here. Presumably, the issue of divine knowledge discussed in *Guide* III:19–21, is included in the attributes and should have been discussed in Part I. Maimonides obviously thought differently.

⁷⁸ Cf. Simon Rawidowicz, “The Structure of the ‘Moreh Nebuchim,’” *Tarbiz* 6, 3 (*The Maimonides Book*) (1935): 41–89, 61 [Heb] (= *Likkutei Tarbiz 5V: Studies in Maimonides* [Jerusalem: Magnes, 1985]: 41–89, 61).

⁷⁹ *Guide* I:35, 80–81.

⁸⁰ See, for example, *Guide*, Part III, Introduction. On the connection between the mysteries of the Torah and metaphysics in this chapter, see Arthur Hyman, “Interpreting Maimonides,” in *Maimonides: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Joseph A. Buijs (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 20.

of Torah.” By contrast, members of the multitude must channel the passion for metaphysics to beliefs defined as “artifice,” according to the lists that Maimonides presented in chapter 35.

Summary

Maimonides could largely be said to have formulated his views while engaged in a concealed dialogue with his predecessors, especially Saadia, representing the *geonim* who, in Maimonides' view, had been influenced by Kalām (*Guide* I:71). The polemical dialogue, however, is only one literary theme that merges into the dominant flow of motifs such as Eros and politics.

The context

Understanding the passion for metaphysics and its standing enables further insight into this unit of chapters and its setting. A latent motif directing Maimonides' discussions in the *Guide* is a somewhat critical perception of the speculative (that is, non-halakhic) rabbinic approach. In Maimonides' view, the rabbinic approach coalesced with that of the Kalām, which had influenced the *geonim*. In some measure, the unit of I:31–35 is a preliminary to the open polemic with Kalām at the end of Part I of the *Guide*.

Maimonides hinted to the reader that the passion for metaphysics had come to serve the interests of theologians who channelled the urge for knowledge into an urge for the verification of religion.

As for why Maimonides embedded this unit in the midst of the lexicographical chapters, scholars dealing with the order of the chapters in the *Guide* paid attention to this question. The polemic with Kalām helps to clarify the standing of this unit as a preparation for both the chapters on the divine attributes – epitomizing the metaphysical discussion – and for the chapters contending with Kalām.

The order of the *Guide* invites another observation. I argued above that Maimonides constructed the *Guide* as an inverse pyramid regarding the quality of the issues he explored. He opened with the summit of metaphysics, the doctrine of the divine attributes, and slowly descended to other areas. Maimonides did stress that the *Guide* is not meant to teach science (end of *Guide* II:2), but he similarly argued against beginning the discussion with metaphysics. In one respect, this is paradoxical: Maimonides cautions against starting with metaphysics but himself began his book with it – the negation of God's corporeality and a discussion of the divine attributes. We learned, however, that this discussion has political aspects. Maimonides also emphasized in chapter 34 that the multitude is to be shown the danger of beginning with

metaphysics. He thereby unequivocally demonstrated that the *Guide* is not intended for the multitude, perhaps explaining the setting of this unit of chapters. At the heart of the discussion that opens the *Guide*, Maimonides clarified that his book is not a model of a work for the multitude since he himself does not follow its recommendations. This book, contrary to its messages, surrendered to the passion for metaphysics, and ordinary persons will consequently dismiss it on grounds of inconsistency. The wise, however, will understand that Maimonides charts different paths for the perfect man and for the multitude.

The passion

Love of God is constitutive of Maimonidean thought, an issue that many have already addressed.⁸¹ Maimonides points out two stages of passion (and also a process of attaining perfection), characterizing each one with a different concept of love. The first stage characterizes humanity in general and refers to the passion (*shawq*) for metaphysics. Maimonides himself, as noted, rendered *shawq* as *ta'avah* (desire) in one of the instances he translated his own writings into Hebrew. If the one acquiring knowledge overcomes the *shawq*, learns the sciences in the proper order, does not require demonstration for what cannot be demonstrated and does not deny something whose contradiction has not been proven, he reaches the second stage – *'ishq* – contemplation and desire for God. Maimonides depicted passion undergoing a sublimation process, from coarse eroticism to refined love and from the urge to cross boundaries to the experience of focusing on the abstract divinity and on the longing for communion with it. The two stages of the process are the leitmotif of the entire *Guide*. They represent the meeting of the two extremes – Eros and rational conjunction. In *Mishneh Torah*, by contrast, Maimonides preferred to mention only the supreme stage. Commentators and scholars frequently cite the well-known *halakhah* on love of God.⁸² Maimonides omitted from *Mishneh Torah* the metaphysical impulse typical of humans as such because he saw no need to mention in his halakhic formulation the beginning of the process – the first stage, that parallels Eros. Yet, the supreme stage of love of God, which is also depicted in the concluding chapters of the *Guide*, does merit halakhic formulation because it is both a halakhic and a philosophical final cause.

⁸¹ See, for example, Kreisel, “Judah Halevi’s Influence”; Daniel J. Lasker, “Love of God and Knowledge of God in Maimonides’ Philosophy,” in *Écriture et réécriture des textes philosophiques médiévaux: Volume d’hommage à Colette Sirat*, ed. Jacqueline Hamesse and Olga Weijers (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006): 329–345.

⁸² Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, The Book of Knowledge*, “Laws of the Foundations of the Torah,” 4:12, trans. Moses Hyamson (Jerusalem: Boys Town, 1962), 39b. See BT Berakhot 17a; Yoma 87b.

Rationalist faith

Many scholars have commented on the nature of Maimonidean rationalism. This unit of chapters diverts the focus of Maimonidean rationalism towards its psychological beginning. Everything is overshadowed by the psychological determination that the will to know the beginning and the cosmic is inherent in human nature. Maimonides emphasized that ordinary individuals also seek universal knowledge, the source of being, the structure of the psyche, and so forth. Moreover, the quest for knowledge is instinctive and characteristic of humans as such.

The sexual motif latent in the unit's discourse as a whole conveys the passion to know. Maimonides' use of sexuality was a priori intended to highlight the negation and the harm. Its very use, however, teaches that the passion for knowledge is almost as uncontrollable as the sexual act and, on these very grounds, entails enormous risks. Maimonides views the sexual urge as the lowest of human positions and the "sense of touch" as a terrible shame. But it is precisely this urge that enables the description of the fundamental passion for metaphysics – the quest for the most sublime type of knowledge pointing to a quasi-circularity that brings together the highest and lowest points.

Into this discussion, Maimonides wove not only the aim of knowledge but also the political goal. The ruler of the exemplary state must restrain the metaphysical drive and turn it into a cathartic element, making this the central task in the ruler's being. From the perspective of Andalusian philosophy and history of ideas, this unit of chapters seemingly denotes an almost Copernican revolution in the Jewish society's rationalist scale of values. From Maimonides' perspective, however, this was not a revolution, and these trends had already been hinted at in his *Commentary to the Mishnah*.

Henceforth, the key to understanding humans is the acquisition of knowledge. To reiterate: the darkest urges in the definition of humans are the sexual drive and the urge for knowledge. Maimonides tied together the two extremes between which humans fluctuate. At the beginning of the introduction to Tractate Avot, he noted that the soul is one and its faculties many. Psychological unity now points to a new dimension: the animative dimension of procreation meets the rational dimension of knowledge acquisition. Maimonides' approach can be defined as "a belief in rationality." He formulated a theory about the passion for knowledge, anchored it in human psychology, and pointed to its full culmination in the supreme stages of knowledge.

Another intellectual phenomenon that had already begun in Maimonides' time will highlight the power of his rationalist belief. In the literature of Ashkenaz pietists, the sexual drive was harnessed to describe the human relationship with God. These pietists sensed that sexuality is the proper way of portraying the uncontrollable passion for God and, therefore, often resorted to such images. As his life was coming to an end, Maimonides may have heard about the circle of R. Judah he-Hasid, the prominent figure among these pietists. Instead of studying the divine, Maimonides

made metaphysical study, which by its very nature includes comprehensive knowledge, the object of sexual passion. Controlling the passion for knowledge is thus also the proper way of drawing close to metaphysics. When this passion meets the passion for communion with the divine, or at least with the separate intellect, it becomes a genuine obsession, as evident from the concluding chapters of *The Guide of the Perplexed*.

Selected Bibliography

- Abrahamov, Binyamin. *Divine Love in Islamic Mysticism: The Teachings of al-Ghazālī and al-Dabbāgh*. London: Routledge Curzon, 2003.
- Berman, Lawrence V. "Ibn Bājjah and Maimonides." PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1959.
- Diamond, James A. "The Failed Theodicy of a Rabbinic Pariah: A Maimonidean Recasting of Elisha ben Abuyah." *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 9 (2003): 353–380.
- Eran, Amira. "'Artifice' as a Device for the Study of the Divinity in the Writings of Maimonides and Averroes." *Pe'amim* 61 (1995): 109–131.
- Harvey, Steven. "The Meaning of Terms Designating Love in Judeo-Arabic Thought and Some Remarks on the Judeo-Arabic Interpretation of Maimonides." In *Judeo-Arabic Studies: Proceedings of the Founding Conference of the Society for Jewish-Arabic Studies*, edited by Norman Golb, 175–196. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997.
- Harvey, Warren Z. "Sex and Health in Maimonides." In *Moses Maimonides: Physician, Scientist, and Philosopher*, edited by Fred Rosner and Samuel Kottke, 33–39. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1993.
- Hyman, Arthur. "Interpreting Maimonides." In *Maimonides: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Joseph A. Buijs, 19–29. Notre Dame, ID: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988.
- Idel, Moshe. "Sitra 'Arayot in Maimonides' Thought." In *Maimonides and Philosophy*, edited by Shlomo Pines and Yirmiyahu Yovel, 79–91. Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1986.
- Kellner, Menachem M. *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism*. Oxford: Littman Library, 2006.
- Klein-Braslavy, Sara. *King Solomon and Philosophical Esotericism in the Thought of Maimonides*. Jerusalem: Magnes, 1996.
- Kreisel, Howard. "Judah Halevi's Influence on Maimonides: A Preliminary Appraisal." In *Maimonidean Studies* 2, edited by Arthur Hyman, 95–121. New York: The Michael Scharf Publication Trust of Yeshiva University Press, 1991.
- Kreisel, Howard. *Maimonides' Political Thought: Studies in Ethics, Law, and the Human Ideal*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1999.
- Lasker, Daniel J. "Love of God and Knowledge of God in Maimonides' Philosophy." In *Écriture et réécriture des textes philosophiques médiévaux: Volume d'hommage offert à Colette Sirat*, edited by Jacqueline Hamesse and Olga Weijers, 329–345. Turnhout: Brepols, 2006.
- Nuriel, Avraham. *Concealed and Revealed in Medieval Philosophy*. Jerusalem: Magnes, 2000.
- Schwartz, Dov. "Avicenna and Maimonides on Immortality: A Comparative Study." In *Medieval and Modern Perspectives on Muslim-Jewish Relations*, edited by Ronald L. Nettler, 185–197. Chur: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995.
- Schwartz, Dov. "The Separate Intellects and Maimonides' Argumentation." In *Between Rashi and Maimonides*, edited by Ephraim Kanarfogel and Moshe Sokolow, 59–92. New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2010.

Lawrence Kaplan

The Purpose of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides' Theory of Parables, and Sceptical versus Dogmatic Readings of the *Guide*

A pearl lost in a dark house and apples of gold in settings of silver

Towards the end of the first chapter of his rich, provocative, tightly argued, and award-winning book, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides' Guide*,¹ Professor Josef Stern depicts two different ways of viewing the *Guide*'s aim. The first,

[...] the standard reading [...] is that Maimonides is concerned with a meta-philosophical problem, the problem of the relation between philosophy and scriptural religion, or between reason and revelation, rational truth versus revealed truth. On this approach, the *Guide* is a catalogue of topics about which the Reason versus Revelation question can be posed: about what we can know and say about the nature of God, the origination or eternity of the world, prophecy, providence, and so on. (MF 15)

The second way, the one that Stern advocates,

[...] conceives of Maimonides' project differently. The *Guide* is addressed to a classic philosophical rather than a meta-philosophical problem: In what does human perfection and true happiness consist? Is it material or intellectual or something else? Are perfection and happiness realizable by humans or unachievable ideals? And how does such a goal negotiate the competing, conflicting demands of being a complex, composite human being – composed of both intellect and body, form and matter? [...] The *Guide*, in short, is an attempt to understand as best as a human can, an understanding that itself has serious constraints, a classic problem in Torah/philosophy. (MF 15)

Regarding Maimonides' answer to the "classic philosophical problem" he addresses in the *Guide*, Stern provides what I would call a moderate sceptical reading, namely, that 1) Maimonides "believes in severe limitations on the human intellectual capacity to know metaphysics" (MF 6); that 2) consequently, it is impossible to attain human intellectual perfection; and that 3) we must nevertheless not surrender "the ideal of human intellectual perfection" as a regulative ideal (MF 7). This is as opposed to what Stern refers to as the dogmatic reading of the *Guide*, according to which Maimonides believes that "it is humanly possible to achieve metaphysical knowledge, if not of

¹ Josef Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides' Guide* [=MF] (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013). All references are in parentheses in the text.

all subjects, then of some and at least in part,” and consequently that “the ideal [of intellectual perfection] is humanly realizable” (*MF* 4–5).

With respect to these “two different ways of viewing the aim of the *Guide*,” I am not certain that they have to be mutually exclusive, that it is a matter of either-or. Why not say that the *Guide* is concerned *both* with the meta-philosophical problem of the relationship between philosophy and scriptural religion *and* with the classic philosophical problem regarding the nature and attainability of human perfection and true happiness? Perhaps we should see these “two ways of viewing the aim of the *Guide*” as more a matter of emphasis: Is the *Guide* concerned *primarily* with the meta-philosophical problem of the relationship between philosophy and scriptural religion and only *secondarily* with the classic philosophical problem regarding the nature and attainability of human perfection and true happiness? Or is it the other way around? One reason why Stern finds the standard reading problematic is that it implies that “philosophy is something distinct from, and foreign to, the Torah,” although, in truth, for Maimonides, “the study of philosophy [...] was never foreign or external to Judaism or the Torah” (*MF* 14). I will return to this point at the end of my essay.

Be this as it may, my goal in this essay is to link these “two different ways of viewing the aim of the *Guide*,” and, more specifically, the question of the sceptical versus the dogmatic interpretation of the *Guide* to two different ways of resolving a well-known problem in Maimonides’ theory in the *Guide* regarding the nature of biblical parables.

First a few words about Maimonides’s stated purpose in writing the *Guide*. At the beginning of his Introduction to the *Guide* Maimonides states that his work has two main purposes: the first being “to explain the meaning of certain terms occurring in the books of prophecy” (*Guide* 1: Introduction: 5)² and the second being “the explanation of very obscure parables occurring in the books of the prophets, but not explicitly identified there as such” (*Guide* 1: Introduction:6). However, it soon becomes clear from both his discussion later in the Introduction and in other statements scattered through the *Guide* that his main goal is the explanation of the parables.³ To state this goal in full:

² *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963). All parenthetical references to the *Guide* in the text and notes are to this translation, by part, chapter, and page.

³ See *Guide* 1: Introduction: 9, where Maimonides states that the Account of the Beginning at the beginning of Genesis takes the form of a parable that uses “equivocal terms so that the multitude may comprehend them in accord with the capacity of their understanding and the weakness of their representation, whereas the perfect man, who is already informed, will comprehend them otherwise.” Thus, it becomes clear that parables are constructed through the use of equivocal terms. Later on, in the *Guide*, Maimonides states three times that “the first purpose of this Treatise is to explain what can be explained of the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot” (*Guide* 2:2: Preface: 254; 2:29:346; 3: Introduction: 415). These statements might seem to contradict Maimonides’ claim in the Introduction to the first part that the first purpose of the book is “to explain the meaning of certain

This Treatise also has a second purpose, namely the explanation of very obscure parables occurring in the books of the prophets, but not explicitly identified there as such. Hence, they appear to an ignorant or heedless individual as possessing only an external meaning (*zahir*), but no internal one (*batin*). However, when he who is a sage in truth examines these parables and interprets them according to their external meaning (*zahir*), he is overcome with great perplexity” (*Guide* 1: Introduction: 6).

Thus, what characterizes a parable is its possessing a *zahir* and a *batin*. Further on in the Introduction, however – and this is the well-known problem to which I referred above – Maimonides famously seems to offer two conflicting views of the value of the *zahir* of parables. First, he cites a rabbinic parable that compares the *zahir* of a parable to a taper whose sole value lies in enabling him to find a pearl lost in his house, the pearl being the parable’s *batin* (*Guide* 1: Introduction: 11). Here the *zahir* of a parable, as the Sages explicitly say, is “worth nothing.” Then he cites a parable from the book of *Proverbs* where the Sage, that is, Solomon, states that the well-constructed parable is like “apples of gold in settings of silver” (*Guide* 1: Introduction:11). Here the *zahir* of a parable possesses the value of silver, since it “contains wisdom that is useful in many respects, among which is the welfare of human societies,” while its *batin*, its internal meaning, possesses the value of gold, since it “contains wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with truth as it is.” As many have noted, Maimonides uses two parables – one rabbinic, one biblical – to illuminate the nature of parables themselves. Perhaps, then, we may refer to these two parables as meta-parables.

On account of the importance of these two meta-parables we will cite them in full, together with Maimonides’ explication of their meaning and significance.

“Our Rabbis say: A man who loses a *sela* or a pearl in his house can find the pearl by lighting a taper worth an *issar*. In the same way, this parable in itself is worth nothing, but by means of it you can understand the words of the Torah” (Midrash on Song of Songs 1:1). Now consider the explicit affirmation of the Sages [...] that the internal meanings (*batin*) of “the words of the Torah” are a pearl, whereas the external meaning (*zahir*) of all parables is worth nothing, and their comparison of the concealment of a subject by the parable’s external meaning to a man who let drop a pearl in his house, which was dark and full of furniture. Now the pearl is there, but he does not see it and does not know where it is. It is as though it is no longer in his possession, as it is impossible for him to derive any benefit from it until, as has been mentioned, he lights a lamp – an act to which an understanding of the parable corresponds.

terms occurring in the books of prophecy,” while its second purpose is “the explanation of very obscure parables occurring in the books of the prophets, but not explicitly identified there as such.” However, by “first” and “second” in the Introduction Maimonides means first and second in nature and time and by “first” in his statements later in the *Guide* he means first in importance. Note that though Maimonides states in 2:29 “the first purpose of this Treatise is to explain [...] the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot,” in the Introduction to part 3 he states that “the chief aim of this Treatise is to explain [...] the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot.” For the difference between a first aim in the sense of “prior in nature and time” and a first aim in the sense of “greater in nobility,” see *Guide* 3:27:510–511.

Maimonides immediately launches into his citation of the second meta-parable, followed again by his explication of its meaning and significance.

The Sage has said: “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver” (Prov. 25:11) [...] The Sage accordingly said that a saying uttered with a view to two meanings is like an apple of gold overlaid with silver filigree-work having very small holes. Now see how marvellously this dictum describes the well-constructed parable. For he says that in a saying that has two meanings – he means an external and internal one – the external meaning (*zahir*) ought to be as beautiful as silver, while its internal meaning (*batin*) ought to be more beautiful than the external one, the former being in comparison to the latter as gold is to silver. Its external meaning also ought to contain in it something that indicates to someone considering it what is to be found in its internal meaning, as happens in the case of an apple of gold with silver filigree-work having very small holes. When looked at from a distance or with imperfect attention it is deemed to be an apple of silver; but when a keen-sighted observer looks at it with full attention, its interior becomes clear to him and he knows that it is of gold. The parables of the prophets [...] are similar. Their external meaning contains wisdom that is useful in many respects, among which is the welfare of human societies, as is shown by the external meaning of *Proverbs* and similar sayings. Their internal meaning, on the other hand, contains wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with truth as it is.

So, to return to our well-known problem, what, for Maimonides, is the value of a parable’s *zahir*: Silver or nothing?

Already in my doctoral thesis, which dealt with, among other matters, issues in exegesis of the *Guide*, I raised this problem and canvassed the varying solutions that both medieval and modern scholars have offered.⁴ In his book, Stern similarly reviews the different solutions offered (*MF* 27–28), and, to a certain extent, we are in agreement regarding our reasons for rejecting some of the them. Thus Abravanel, and also Mordecai Jaffe, whose commentary on the *Guide* I analysed in my thesis, maintain that when the Sages state that the *zahir* of a parable is worth nothing, they don’t disagree with Solomon that its value is silver, but what they mean is that its silver value is worthless in comparison with the gold of its inner meaning.⁵ As Stern notes, the text does not state this (*MF* 27),⁶ to which one can add that, while most people would, no doubt, greatly prefer a gold watch or bracelet to a silver one, if offered a silver one they wouldn’t exactly sneeze at it. More recently, Roslyn Weiss offers an explanation similar to that of Abravanel and Jaffe, arguing that when the Sages state that the *zahir*

⁴ Lawrence Kaplan, *Rationalism and Rabbinic Culture in Sixteenth Century Eastern Europe: Rabbi Mordecai Jaffe’s Levush Pinat Yikrat* (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1975), 173–175. I discussed this as well in a private communication with Stern (May 23, 2003).

⁵ See the Commentary of Isaac Abravanel on *Moreh Nevukhim* (Hebrew), trans. Samuel ibn Tibbon, with four commentaries: Efodi, Shem Tob, Asher Crescas, and Isaac Abravanel (Warsaw/Jerusalem: Isaac Goldman, 1872/1960) [=MN] ad loc; and Mordecai Jaffe, *Levush Pinat Yikrat* (Brooklyn: New York, 1967), ad. loc.

⁶ Stern only refers to Abravanel’s commentary and not to Jaffe’s. In my e-mail to Stern (see above, n. 4), I commented “This [explanation], I think we would all agree, is a stretch.”

of a parable is worth nothing, they only mean it is worth nothing in terms of its truth value, but it can possess the worth of silver in terms of its social-political value.⁷ But the Sages in their parable deny that a parable's *zahir* possesses any intrinsic value at all, possessing only an instrumental value, while when Solomon attributes to a parable's *zahir* the worth of silver, he does grant it intrinsic value, even if that value only be socio-political in nature. Note that, for Maimonides, both the silver *zahir* and the gold *batin* of the "apples of gold in settings of silver" parable are "useful," though for different purposes.⁸

Leo Strauss suggests that Maimonides is "tacitly confronting" the view of the Sages that the *zahir* of a parable is worth nothing with that of Solomon, who, because he – like Maimonides himself – had a greater appreciation of the value of the political than they did, ascribes the value of silver to the political wisdom contained in a parable's external meaning.⁹ A similar approach is espoused by Yair Lorberbaum.¹⁰ But, as both Stern (*MF* 27–28) and I¹¹ note, the problem with this solution is that Maimonides himself on several occasions expresses a very negative view of the *zahir* of certain parables, for example that of *ma'aseh bereishit*, the Account of the Beginning, concerning which Maimonides states that "the external sense of these texts [regarding the Account of the Beginning] leads either to a grave corruption of the imagination and to giving vent to evil opinions with regard to the deity or to an absolute denial of the action of the deity and to disbelief in the foundations of the Law" (*Guide* 2:29).

Finally, the medieval commentator Shem Tob and the modern commentator Yehudah Even Shmuel maintain that Maimonides is contrasting the *zahir* of biblical parables, whose meaning is worth silver, with the *zahir* of rabbinic parables, whose meaning is worth nothing.¹² But, in truth, Maimonides' theory of parables, in accordance with the biblio-centric nature of the *Guide* refers only to biblical parables. As we saw already, Maimonides explicitly asserts that the *Guide*'s second purpose is "the explanation of very obscure parables occurring in the books of the prophets, but not explicitly identified there as such."¹³ Note, as well, that while the rabbinic lost pearl

7 Roslyn Weiss, "Four Parables about Peshat as Parable," *The Legacy of Maimonides*, ed. Yamin Levy and Shalom Carmy (Brooklyn: New York, Yashar, 2006): 111–126, esp. 114–116.

8 Moreover, Weiss' thesis compels her to assert that the external sense of every parable possesses some socio-political value. But, as we shall see, such a thesis is almost impossible to maintain.

9 Leo Strauss, "How to Begin to Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*" ("Introductory Essay" to the Chicago edition of the *Guide*), xxxvi and (at greater length) xl.

10 Yair Lorberbaum, "The Men of Knowledge and the Sages are Drawn, as it were, toward this Purpose by the Divine Will: On Understanding the Parable in the *Guide of the Perplexed*," (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 71 (2001–2002): 107–110.

11 In my e-mail to Stern (above, n. 4).

12 See the Commentary of Shem Tob on *MN*, ad loc; and Yehudah Even Shmuel, *Moreh Nevukhim*, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Shvil, 1935): 1–49, esp. 24 (citing Shem Tob).

13 Moreover, later in the Introduction (*Guide* 1: Introduction: 9–10), Maimonides write that he originally planned to write a "Book of Correspondence" that would "explain all the difficult passages in

meta-parable states “this parable in itself is worth nothing, but by means of it you can understand the words of the Torah,” Maimonides paraphrases this statement to read that “the internal meanings (*batin*) of ‘the words of the Torah’ are a pearl.” While it might be possible to interpret the rabbinic statement as referring to rabbinic parables, where these parables enable one to understand biblical texts, “words of Torah,” Maimonides’ paraphrase makes it clear that, for him, the parables referred to by the rabbis in the lost pearl meta-parable, themselves consist of “words of Torah” and are biblical parables. Finally, as we just saw, Maimonides himself expresses a very negative view of the *zahir* of the biblical parable of *ma’aseh bereishit*, the Account of the Beginning.

Stern proposes an original solution to this conundrum:

I propose that Maimonides uses the term “external meaning” (*zahir*) equivocally; by openly juxtaposing the two uses he wants the reader to recognize the ambiguity. In one sense, the external meaning of a parable is worthless and serves only to conceal; in the second sense, it is as valuable as silver because not only is it wisdom in its own right, it also indicates, or reveals, golden wisdom, the internal meaning. On this proposal, parables have three meanings. I shall call the first of these the “vulgar external meaning,” the second the “parabolic external meaning,” and the third: the “parabolic inner meaning” (*batin*) (MF 28).

While this is, indeed, an original and thought-provoking solution to the literary problem of Maimonides’ apparently conflicting views regarding the worth of a parable’s *zahir*, the reader of Stern’s book may wonder what this solution has to do with the substantive issue of the dogmatic versus the sceptical readings of the *Guide*. Here Stern, combining the form and matter of the *Guide* in a brilliant tour de force, argues that, generally, the middle level of the parable, the parabolic external meaning, sets forth an intellectualist, dogmatic reading of the parable’s subject, while the parable’s deepest level, the parabolic inner meaning, sets forth a sceptical reading of its subject. Thus, as Stern argues in his Chapter, “The Parable of Adamic Perfection” (MF 64–96), for Maimonides, the biblical parable of Adam’s sin in the garden of Eden that Maimonides discusses in *Guide* 1:2 has three levels. In the first level, the vulgar external meaning, Gen. 3 is a story about Adam an actual person who does not possess an intellect to begin with (MF 66). In the second level, that of silver, the parabolic external meaning, the story is a parable about Adam-kind, humanity, in which Adam-kind’s being “created” in God’s image, means “to be a fully actualized intellect, exclusively and constantly engaged in the activity of knowledge” (MF 67). Here the intellectualist, dogmatic reading comes to the fore. In the third level, that of gold, the parabolic inner meaning, the story is again a parable about Adam-kind, humanity, but now Adam, as a symbolic representative of mankind, is “originally directed by his intellect to act and live in moderation,” that is,

the *midrashim* where the external sense (*zahir*) contradicts the truth and departs from the intelligible. They are all parables.” However, as he goes on to explain, for a variety of reasons, he dropped the plan. Note that the external sense of these rabbinic *midrashim* is “worth nothing” inasmuch as it “contradicts the truth and departs from the intelligible.”

a chastened “non-ideal ideal, an accommodation of the ‘ideal’ ideal to material necessity” (*MF* 79). Here the sceptical reading of the *Guide* comes to the fore.

I do not wish to deny that some parables may have three levels – though, in my view, not all do – and that a parable’s deepest level may set forth a sceptical Maimonidean view. I do, however, have some problems with Stern’s literary solution. First, I do not understand how a parable can have two *zahirs*. *Zahir*, means the parable’s external, visible, surface level or meaning. It seems to me that, almost by definition, there is only one visible surface. Second, Stern’s claim “that Maimonides uses the term, ‘external meaning’ (*zahir*), equivocally” lacks, in my view, textual support. Third, it seems clear that, for Maimonides, some parables only have two levels, one *zahir*, which is worth silver, and one *batin*. Consider the Solomonic parables of the woman of valour and the married harlot, discussed in some detail in *Guide* 3:8. Here there is no external meaning that does not possess any worth. Rather the *zahir* of these parables – and I do not see how they are parabolic in any way – possess the value of silver, since they “contain wisdom that is useful in many respects, among which is the welfare of human societies,” praising the faithful wife, while warning young men not be seduced by married harlots. On the other hand, the *batin* of these parables, their sole internal meaning, namely, that the married harlot is a symbol of matter in general, “for matter is in no way found without form [...] and whatever form is found in it, does but prepare it to receive another form” (*Guide* 3:8:431), and the woman of valour is a symbol of “excellent and suitable” matter, possess the value of gold, since they contain “wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with truth as it is,” insofar as they teach man to use his form, aided by “the commandments and prohibitions of the law, to quell all the impulses of matter,” thus allowing him to better devote himself to knowledge of the truth as it is (*Guide* 3:8: 433). Indeed, I believe that all of the “apples of gold in settings of silver” parables possess only two levels, a *zahir* level of silver and a *batin* level of gold.¹⁴ I further believe that Stern’s focus in his discussion on the “apples of gold in settings of silver” type of parable leads him to neglect the lost pearl type of parable, which, as I will argue, is much more relevant for Maimonides’ project than the “apples of gold in settings of silver” type.

Finally, as we saw, Stern claims that Maimonides’ view set forth in *Guide* 1:2 that the biblical narrative about Adam’s sin in the Garden of Eden should be understood, to begin with, as a parable about Adam-kind, humanity, in which Adam-kind’s being “created” in God’s image, means “to be a fully actualized intellect, exclusively and constantly engaged in the activity of knowledge” refers to the parable’s parabolic external meaning, its supposedly silver level. But, as Maimonides makes clear in

¹⁴ Another parable of this type is the Solomonic parable of the “little city with the few people in it” (Eccles.9:14–15), discussed briefly by Maimonides in *Guide* 3:22:490. Interestingly enough, Maimonides’ own, very famous palace parable (*Guide* 3:51:618–620) also appears to be a parable of this type. This would have important implications regarding how we should understand it, but I cannot enter into this matter here.

his castigation of the “learned man” who understands the Garden of Eden narrative according to its external meaning, this parabolic understanding can be arrived at only after careful reflection (*Guide* 1:2:24). But Maimonides, in speaking of the “apples of gold in settings of silver” type of parable, says that the silver filigree work, which for Stern supposedly refers to the parabolic external meaning, can be perceived even “when looked at from a distance or with imperfect attention” (*Guide* 1: Introduction:12).

As I said, Stern can still maintain that many – not all – parables have three levels, and the third and deepest level brings to light a sceptical Maimonides; but rather than these three levels consisting of two *zahirs* and one *batin*, I would suggest that they would consist of one *zahir*, which is worth nothing, and two *batins* – after all there can be different levels of inwardness,¹⁵ of depth: the middle level setting forth an intellectual view, the deepest level, a sceptical view. Thus Stern need not change his basic explanation of Maimonides’ understanding of the Garden of Eden story, and can still continue to maintain that, for Maimonides, the biblical parable of Adam’s sin has three levels: the first being the anti-intellectual level; the second being the intellectual dogmatic level; and the third being the sceptical level; but now the first level would not refer to the vulgar external meaning, but simply to the external meaning, the second level would not refer to a parabolic external meaning, but to a mid-level parabolic inner meaning, while the third level would indeed refer to a parabolic inner meaning, but not as contrasted with a vulgar external meaning and a parabolic external meaning, but rather, since it is a *deep level* parabolic inner meaning, as contrasted with an external meaning and a less hidden parabolic inner meaning. However, this modification, while allowing Stern to maintain his overall sceptical reading of the *Guide*’s parables, means that he has not resolved the literary problem of Maimonides’ apparently conflicting views regarding the value of a parable’s *zahir*.

Coming to my own view, I always agreed with those scholars, for example, Avraham Nuriel,¹⁶ who maintain that Maimonides is referring two types of biblical parables: the lost pearl type, where the *zahir* is worth nothing, and the “apples of gold in settings of silver” type, where the *zahir* possesses the value of silver. But I could not answer the question as to why it is that in some parables the *zahir* of a parable is worth nothing, while in others it possesses the value of silver. What I now wish to suggest is that what determines whether the *zahir* of a parable is worth nothing or,

¹⁵ Note that Maimonides in the lost pearl parable uses the Arabic *بواطن*, meaning “internal meanings” in the plural. Pines’ translation, however, which I quietly corrected, translates *בואטן* as “internal meaning” in the singular, thus obscuring this important nuance. Thus, if any parable, for Maimonides possesses three levels, it would be a parable of the lost pearl type, and not a parable of the “apples of gold in settings of silver” type.

¹⁶ Avraham Nuriel, “The Treatment of Parables that are not Explicitly Identified as Parables in the *Guide of the Perplexed*,” (Hebrew), *Galui ve-Samui be-Pilosophiyyah ha-Yehudit bi-Yemei ha-Beynayyim* (Jerusalem, 2000), 151.

to the contrary, possesses the value of silver is *the varying nature of its batin*. That is, while the most obvious difference – one certainly not to be minimized – between these two types of parables is the worth of their respective external meanings, it also turns out on closer examination that their internal meanings also differ in nature and that this latter difference has an impact on the worth of their respective external meanings. Of course, that the difference between the external meanings of these two types of parables is more obvious than the difference between their internal meanings is exactly what we should expect!

Where the *batin* of a parable, say, for example, the Account of the Beginning or the Account of the Chariot, consists of exceptionally profound, valuable, pearl-like matters, then its *zahir* is worth nothing – except that the *zahir* serves the paradoxical dual function of first concealing and obscuring the *batin*, which, being profound, deserves to be concealed and obscured, but then pointing to the *batin* once one has succeeded in, as it were, “decoding” the *zahir*. Here the gap in value between the parable’s *zahir* and *batin* is very great, a veritable abyss, and here we can speak of an esoteric *batin* concealed by the darkness of the parable’s *zahir*.

We should note that the differences between the rabbinic parable and Maimonides’ explication of it. The rabbinic parable itself does not refer to the *zahir*’s darkness, does not state that the pearl was lost in a dark house full of furniture; indeed, it does not say that the house in which the pearl was lost is to be identified with the parable’s external meaning. It just refers to the *zahir* as a taper worth an *issar*, the lighting of which enables one to “understand the words of the Torah.” The midrash thus focuses on the *zahir* as pointing to and illuminating the *batin*. Maimonides’ explication – in truth a modification – fills in the midrash in two ways. First, he states that it is the parable’s external meaning that conceals its *batin*, as a house conceals a pearl that was lost in it, and, second, he describes that house as dark and full of furniture. By stressing the darkness of the parable’s *zahir*, he highlights the profound, hidden, esoteric nature of its *batin*. And, indeed, the truths taught by the *batin* of such parables as the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot are referred to by Maimonides as “great secrets” (*Guide* 1: Introduction:7) and “profound matters” (*Guide* 1: Introduction:9). Precisely on account of the profound, secret nature of the type of parable’s *batin*, it needs to be concealed and obscured by its *zahir*, to begin with, until an act of understanding transforms the *zahir* from a dark house to an illuminated lamp. That is, the lamp is the *zahir*, when illuminated by the act of understanding, the function of which is no longer to obscure the *batin*, but rather to shine a bright light on it. Although I have referred to this type of parable up to this point as the lost pearl parable, in light of Maimonides’ modification of it, I will now refer to it as the pearl lost in a dark house parable.¹⁷

¹⁷ Weiss, “Four Parables,” 112–113, also notes the differences between the rabbinic parable and Maimonides’ explication – in truth, modification – of it. Indeed, she goes so far as to refer to Maimonides’

The “apples of gold in settings of silver” type of parable is different. There the *batin* of a parable is compared to an apple of gold, since it “contains wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is” – in which circumstances, the *batin*, while exceptionally valuable, possesses, in my view, no particularly profound quality. To return to Solomon’s married harlot parable: Unlike the case of the *batin* of the pearl lost in a dark house type of parable, which, as we saw, teach great secrets, profound matters, and the deepest of truths, the function of the *batin* of the married harlot parable is not to teach the truth, per se, but to teach “wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is” insofar as they teach man to use his form, aided by

explication of the rabbinic parable as Maimonides’ own parable. But while I suggest that, in Maimonides’ explication, the parable’s *zahir* first is a dark house concealing its *batin* and, then, once the *zahir* is illuminated by the intellect it becomes a lamp enabling one to discover the parable’s hitherto concealed *batin*, Weiss maintains that “whereas the taper in the rabbinic parable is the *peshat* [*zahir*], in Maimonides’ parable the lamp is the intellect’s power of understanding.” Thus, for Weiss, in Maimonides’ parable the *peshat* has “negative value,” that is, “rather than [as in the rabbinic parable] being a help in the discovery of the hidden truth, the *peshat* in Maimonides’ parable is a liability.” I find Weiss’ claim difficult to understand. How can one penetrate to the inner meaning of the parable if not through its words, that is, its external sense? Thus, in the Introduction to part 3 of the *Guide* (416), Maimonides states that he discovered the inner meaning of the Account of the Chariot set forth in Ezekiel, Chapters 1 and 10, with the help of “the texts of the prophetic books and the dicta of the Sages, together with the speculative premises I possess.” Moreover, if, as Weiss would have it, the *peshat* in Maimonides’ parable does not even possess instrumental value in terms of discovering the parable’s inner truth, what purpose does it serve? Presumably Weiss would answer that though the *peshat* possesses only negative cognitive value, it possesses positive socio-political value. But, as we shall see in note 19, the *zahir* in the pearl lost in a dark house type of parable does not possess, for Maimonides, any socio-political value, this, as opposed to the apples of gold in settings of silver type of parable. As for Maimonides’ shift from the rabbinic taper to a lamp, I would suggest the following. For the rabbis, who are not working with the notion of an esoteric *batin*, a taper suffices to bring the inner meaning to light. But, for Maimonides, who, as we saw, emphasizes the hidden, deeply esoteric nature of the parable’s *batin*, a lamp is necessary to bring that inner meaning to light. To reiterate, the lamp is the *zahir* when illuminated by the act of understanding. Thus, when Maimonides states that the act of lighting the lamp corresponds to the act of understanding the parable, he means that the person contemplating the words of the *zahir* suddenly penetrates through those words, that suddenly those words become transparent, and the person now understands the parable’s inner meaning, insofar as the *zahir* now, rather than concealing that inner meaning illuminates it. What we have here is an “aha” moment, where the reader, for whom up until the point the text had been a dark blank, suddenly “gets” its inner meaning. But he or she can only get that meaning through the text itself. In this connection, note Maimonides’ remark in a different context, “It is obligatory to set forth a preface, which is like a lamp illuminating the hidden features of the whole of this Treatise” (*Guide* 2:2:253).

Weiss, following the Hebrew translations of Yosef Kafih and Michael Schwarz, translates *zahir* as *peshat*, while I, following the English translation of Pines, translate it as “external sense. It might be noted that Shmuel ibn Tibbon translates *zahir* sometimes as *nigleh*, external sense, sometimes as *peshat*. However, Mordechai Z. Cohen’s important essay, “A Talmudist’s Halakhic Hermeneutics: A New Understanding of Maimonides’ Principle of Peshat Primacy,” *JSIJ* 110 (2012): 257–359, should make one wary of equating *zahir* with *peshat*. Indeed, as Cohen, 264, points out, “the term *peshat* never appears in [...] the *Guide of the Perplexed*.”

“the commandments and prohibitions of the law, to quell all the impulses of matter,” thus allowing him to better devote himself to knowledge of the truth as it is. In such a case, the parable’s *zahir*, containing, as we saw, “wisdom that is useful in many respects, among which is the welfare of human societies,” is compared to a setting of silver, consisting of small apertures that reveal to “the keen-sighted observer who looks at the setting with full attention,” the apple of gold underneath. Here the gap between the parable’s *zahir* and its *batin* is not that great, inasmuch as both contain useful wisdom: the *zahir* containing “wisdom that is useful for the welfare of human societies” and the *batin* containing “wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is.” The *batin* should not be seen as being particularly esoteric.

Indeed, *both* types of wisdom contained in the “apples of gold in settings of silver” type of parable, belong to the fourth category of wisdom that Maimonides describes in the very last chapter of the *Guide*.

The term wisdom is applied in Hebrew in four senses. [...] It is applied to the aptitude for stratagems and ruses [...] It is possible that the meaning of wisdom in Hebrew indicate aptitude for stratagems and the application of thought in such a way that the stratagems and ruses may be used in achieving either rational virtues or moral virtues. (*Guide* 3:54: 632–633)

Thus, in this type of parable, the wisdom of the parable’s *zahir*, that is, the settings of silver, belongs to Maimonides’ fourth type of wisdom, “the aptitude for stratagems and ruses,” but an aptitude used in achieving the moral virtues, while the wisdom of the parable’s *batin*, that is, the apples of gold, *also* belongs to Maimonides’ fourth type of wisdom, “the aptitude for stratagems and ruses,” but here the aptitude is used in achieving the rational virtues. Perhaps this is the reason why such a type of parable can be so “well-constructed,” why “its external meaning” can “contain in it something that indicates to someone considering it what is to be found in its internal meaning, as happens in the case of an apple of gold with silver filigree-work having very small holes.” For since the fourth type of wisdom includes, among other things, “stratagems and ruses [for] achieving either rational virtues or moral virtues,” one can construct a parable where the external and internal senses complement each other, inasmuch as, to reiterate, the external sense can refer to “stratagems and ruses [for] achieving [...] moral virtues,” while the internal sense can refer to “stratagems and ruses [for] achieving [...] rational virtues.”

We may now also understand better the difference between the *batin* of the “apples of gold in settings of silver” type of parable and that of the pearl lost in a dark house parable; for in the latter type of parable the wisdom contained in the parable’s *batin* belongs to Maimonides’ first type of wisdom, namely, wisdom referring “to the apprehension of the true realities” (*Guide* 3:54: 632).¹⁸ Precisely, then, because the

¹⁸ Stern, *MF* 35, points to Maimonides’ description of the *batin*, the internal meaning, of “the apples of gold in settings of silver” type of parable as containing “wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is,” and queries: “This formulation is qualified and prolix. It does not say that the

pearl-like *batin* of this type of parable is truly esoteric and needs to be hidden, this parable is not, and cannot be, well-constructed. That is, even after readers realize that this parable, though “not explicitly identified... as such,” is, indeed, a parable, they will still find it difficult – as they should – to light the parable’s taper to discover the pearl *batin*, hidden in the dark house of its *zahir*.

The difference between the “apples of gold in settings of silver” type of parable and the pearl lost in a dark house type may be connected with another distinction between types of parables, a distinction that Maimonides explicitly draws immediately after his discussion of these two meta-parables:

Know that the prophetic parables are of two kinds. In some of these parables each word has a meaning, while in others the parable as a whole indicates the whole of the intended meaning. In such a parable, very many words are to be found, not every one of which adds something to the intended meaning. They serve rather to embellish the parable and to render it more coherent or to conceal further the intended meaning. Hence the speech proceeds in such a way as to accord with everything required by the parable’s external meaning. Understand this well. (*Guide* 1; Introduction:12)

Maimonides offers Jacob’s ladder (Gen.28:12–13) as an example of the first type of prophetic parable, and Solomon’s parable of the harlot who is also a married woman (Prov. 7:6–21) as an example of the second type of parable. One may suggest that the first type of prophetic parable, where each word has a meaning, corresponds to the pearl lost in a dark house parable. For since in this type of parable the external sense has no value per se, all the elements found in the parable’s external sense can be justified only if they serve the function of pointing to the parable’s internal sense, as in the case of the parable of Jacob’s ladder. On the other hand, in the “apples of gold in settings of silver” type of parable, since the parable’s *zahir* contains “wisdom that is useful for the welfare of human societies,” one can well understand why the parable’s author would wish “to embellish the parable and to render it more coherent,” even if these embellishments do not add anything to the parable’s *batin*, since such

inner meaning is wisdom that consists either in true beliefs or in knowledge of what is true or of reality or of true reality. The wisdom is ‘useful for beliefs’ that are ‘concerned with’ or *about* truth or reality. Why the circumlocution?” Stern offers “a stab at an answer,” one that, not surprisingly, is of a sceptical hue. But in light of my analysis the answer is clear. The wisdom contained in the *batin* of the “apples of gold in settings of silver” type of parable, unlike the wisdom contained in the *batin* of the pearl lost in a dark house type of parable, does not “consist either in true beliefs or in knowledge of what is true or of reality or of true reality,” for the wisdom contained in the *batin* of the former type of parable belongs to Maimonides’ *fourth* type of wisdom, “the application of thought in such a way that the stratagems and ruses may be used in achieving [...] rational virtues,” while it is only the wisdom contained in the *batin* of the latter type of parable that belongs to Maimonides’ *first* type of wisdom, namely, wisdom referring “to the apprehension of the true realities.” Stern’s perplexity arises, then, from his tacit conflation of the different types of wisdom found in the inner meanings of these two different types of parables. Note, incidentally, how my analysis links Maimonides’ Introduction to the *Guide* with its last chapter.

embellishments would lend greater force to the moral teaching set forth by the parable's external sense. Thus, Maimonides maintains that Solomon in his parable of the married harlot, which, as Maimonides states explicitly, is an "apples of gold in settings of silver" parable, presented many details that have no internal signification but "only figure in the consistent development of the parable's external meaning, the circumstances described in it being of the kind typical for adulterers," (*Guide* 1: Introduction:14). Presumably, for Maimonides, Solomon did so in order to alert young men to be aware of and beware of all the circumstances that can lead to adultery.

To return to our main point, what I want to stress is that when Maimonides states in the beginning of the Introduction that one of the two main purposes of the work is "the explanation of very obscure parables occurring in the books of the prophets, but not explicitly identified there as such" he is referring to the *first* type of parable, the pearl lost in the dark house type, and *not* the second type, the apples of gold in the settings of silver type. First, were a true sage to examine parables of the second type, even were he to understand them according to their external meaning (*zahir*) alone, there would be absolutely no reason for him to be "overcome with great perplexity," since the *zahir* of these parables is "beautiful as silver," containing, as stated before, "wisdom that is useful in many respects, among which is the welfare of human societies." Further, I think it should be clear that when Maimonides states that one of the two main purposes of the work is "the explanation of very obscure parables occurring in the books of the prophets," he means by "very obscure parables" parables of the first type, whose external sense is worth nothing, but whose internal sense consists of exceptionally valuable, pearl-like profound matters. Indeed, in his Introduction, when Maimonides discusses the parables he intends to explain in the *Guide*, he describes these parables, for example, the Account of the Beginning, as containing "profound matters" (*batin*) presented "in very obscure words" (*zahir*) (*Guide* 1: Introduction: 9). However, with regard to parables of the second type, its *batin*, the "wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is," while exceptionally valuable, is not particularly profound, nor is its *zahir*, the "wisdom that is useful for the welfare of human societies," particularly obscure. And, indeed, all of the Biblical parables that Maimonides seeks to explain in the *Guide* – first and foremost the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot, but also Jacob's ladder and the Book of Job – are parables of the first type.

In this regard, the parable of Adamic perfection is a pearl lost in the dark house type of parable, and *not* the apples of gold in the settings of silver type. First, its external meaning in suggesting that God's original intention was that man be like an animal, "devoid of intellect," is worth nothing, indeed is positively harmful insofar as it "giv[es] vent to evil opinions with regard to the deity."¹⁹ Second, its *batin*, whether

¹⁹ Weiss, "Four parables," 123, in accordance with her view that the external sense of all parables is "beautiful as silver," that is, possesses socio-political value, "contains wisdom that is useful in

it be just one *batin* (the view to which I incline) or, as Stern would have it, two *batins*, has nothing to do with the gold *batin* of the apples of gold in settings of silver type of parable. For that gold *batin* treats of “wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is,” which is the fourth type of wisdom discussed by Maimonides in the *Guide*’s concluding chapter. The *batin* or *batins* of the parable of Adamic perfections are pearl-like profound – and, in some ways, subversive – truths, truths belonging to the first type of wisdom discussed by Maimonides in the *Guide*’s concluding chapter, truths that need to be concealed in the dark house of the parable’s *zahir* until careful consideration of the *zahir* brings the *batin* to light.

In sum, Maimonides’ goal in the *Guide* is to explain those Biblical parables that appear to lack any wisdom, since their profound inner wisdom is hidden, while their obscure external layer, the *zahir* or *nigleh*, taken by itself, is both worth nothing and positively harmful. As we saw, Maimonides states with regard to the Account of the Beginning, “the external sense of these texts leads either to a grave corruption of the imagination and to giving vent to evil opinions with regard to the deity or to an absolute denial of the action of the deity and to disbelief in the foundations of the Law.” Maimonides thus concedes that the *zahir* of these parables, unlike the *zahir* of the parables of the second type, is by itself worth nothing, but he defends the utility of the *zahir* of these parables on the grounds that, as I already noted, the *zahir* of

many respects, among which is the welfare of human societies,” argues that the socio-political value possessed by the external sense of the story – or, better, the parable – of Adam in the Garden of Eden is “the belief that people become godlike when they distinguish good from evil, the belief that what matters to God and is characteristic of God is moral goodness rather than truth or necessity. There can be no doubt that the belief that God is concerned with matters of good and evil and that it is in their moral sensibilities that human beings resemble Him is beneficial to society and to moral life generally.” But if this is the case, why does Maimonides (*Guide* 1:2: 24) castigate the “learned man” who offered this reading so severely? Surprisingly, Weiss glosses over the fact that, as I already indicated in the text, in the story of the Garden of Eden God *forbids* man from eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. But, if the point of the external sense of the story, as Weiss maintains, is that people attain true human perfection, “become godlike when they distinguish good from evil,” then the story’s implication, as the “learned man” no doubt knew, is that a gnostic-like God, jealous of man, sought to prevent him from attaining perfection. Not exactly an exalted moral lesson. It is no doubt for this reason that Maimonides castigates the “learned man” so severely, and it is no doubt for this reason that Maimonides states the Account of the Beginning, of which the story of Adam in the Garden of Eden forms a part, taken in its external sense, far from “contain[ing] wisdom that is useful in many respects, among which is the welfare of human societies,” rather “giv[es] vent to evil opinions with regard to the deity.” Moreover, if we look at the two other main parables that Maimonides discusses in the *Guide*, the Account of the chariot (*Guide* 3:1–7) and the story of Job (*Guide* 3:22–23), both, in my view, being examples of the pearl lost in a dark house type of parable, again we see that their external sense *fails* to “contain wisdom that is useful in many respects, among which is the welfare of human societies.” What socially useful wisdom is contained in the Account of the Chariot taken in its external sense, with its descriptions of beasts and wheels? What socially useful wisdom is contained in the story of Job taken in its external sense, with its account of God and the Satan wagering over the fate of Job? None that I can see.

these parables serves the paradoxical dual function of first concealing these parables' *batin*, which being profound deserves to be concealed, but subsequently pointing to their *batin*, once one succeeds in, as it were, "decoding" the *zahir*.

The *Zahir* of the commandments and the *Zahir* of parables

In support of my view, I would like to show that Maimonides' explanation of the commandments shares a similar concern with his explanation of parables. First, as Maimonides makes clear in *Guide* 3:28, he is concerned with explaining the reasons for those commandments that on their face appear to serve no purpose, that is, those commandments that appear to lack wisdom, such as "the prohibitions of the mingled stuff (*sha'atnez*), of the mingling [of diverse species], and of meat and milk" (*Guide* 3:28: 513), which do not seem to serve any of the three goals of the law set down by Maimonides in that chapter and the previous one: "abolishing reciprocal wrongdoing, or urging to a noble moral quality leading to a good social relationship, or communicating a correct opinion" (*Guide* 3:28:513). Second, Maimonides is concerned with the *zahir*, the external sense, of the commandments, and this in two senses. First, as he states towards the end of *Guide* 3:41 in connection with the law requiring that a man who pollutes himself by night must go out of the camp of war, his goal is "to give reasons for the [biblical] text according to its external meaning," its *zahir* (*Guide* 3:41:567). However, as becomes clear from both the reference back to his discussion of "an eye for an eye" at the chapter's beginning,²⁰ where Maimonides contrasts the biblical text with the legal science, *al fiqh* (*Guide* 3:41:558),²¹ and, even more so, from

²⁰ Thus Maimonides, when discussing the biblical text requiring that a man who pollutes himself by night must go out of the camp of war, states "I have already made known to you that I shall give reasons for the [biblical] text according to its external meaning." This, as stated in the body of my essay, is a clear reference to his discussion of an eye for an eye at the beginning of the chapter.

²¹ "And he who has deprived someone of a member, shall be deprived of a similar member: 'As he hath maimed a man, so it shall be rendered unto him' (Lev. 24:20). You should not engage in cogitation concerning the fact that in such cases we punish by imposing a fine. For at present my purpose is to give reasons for the [biblical] texts, and not for the pronouncements of the legal science (*fiqh*)" (*Guide* 3:41:558). From the cross reference at the end of the chapter discussing the biblical text requiring that a man who pollutes himself by night must go out of the camp of war to the discussion at the beginning of the chapter of the biblical text that "he who has deprived someone of a member, shall be deprived of a similar member" – "I have already made known to you that I that I shall give reasons for the [biblical] text according to its external meaning" – it is clear that when Maimonides says "For at present my purpose is to give reasons for the [biblical] texts," he means "the [biblical] text according to its external meaning." The contrast here, then, as stated in the body of the essay, is between the *zahir* and the *fiqh*.

many passages in the *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*,²² the *zahir*, the external meaning, referred to here is *not* to be contrasted with a *batin*, but with *Peirushim mekubalim*, the divinely revealed oral interpretations of the commandments.²³ As Michael Schwarz comments in a note to his translation of the *Guide*,²⁴ although according to the *zahir* the verse refers to the requirement that a man who pollutes himself by night must go out of the camp of war, according to the *fiqh*, the *Peirush mekubal*, as cited by Maimonides both in his *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, Positive Commandment 31 and, in particular, Negative Commandment 78, and in the *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Bi'at Ha-Mikdash* 3:1–3, 8–10, the verse refers to the requirement that a man who is impure not enter the *Mahaneh Leviyyah*, which translates into the Temple Mount – this law is, incidentally, rather relevant nowadays. Second, returning to *Guide* 3:28, Maimonides, as we saw, stated that his concern is to explain the reasons for those commandments that on their face appear to serve no purpose. The term I paraphrased as “on their face” is actually *zahir*, and Pines translates the phrase as “the commandments from whose external meaning it does not appear that they are useful” (*Guide* 3:28: 513) Pines’ translation is misleading. What we may say is that, in this chapter, Maimonides distinguishes between those commandments whose purpose is *zahir*, that is, immediately visible or discernible, and those whose purpose is not *zahir*, not immediately visible or discernible, or, conversely, those commandments that, in terms of what appears immediately to sight, seem to lack any purpose. But the way Maimonides brings to light the purpose of the commandments falling into the latter category is not by viewing them as parables, not by discovering some supposed *batin* underlying the *zahir*, but, as is well-known, by placing these commandments in their historical context, viewing them as commandments pertaining to the second intention, and the like.

The point is that, for Maimonides, the commandments are *not* parables. As I stated in my first part, a parable contains a *zahir* and a *batin*. This is *not* the case with the commandments. Thus, to view commandments as parables, for Maimonides,

²² See Mordechai Z. Cohen’s forthcoming essay, “Hermeneutical Terms, Moving Targets: On the Shifting Relationship between *Peshuto shel Miqra* and *Zahir al-Nass* in the Jewish Exegetical Tradition.” I have, independently of Cohen, studied carefully the relationship between the *zahir* and the *peirushim mekubalim* (*fiqh*) in the *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, but a discussion of this must be left for another time.

²³ My analysis is sharply opposed to that of Stern, (*MF* 351–352, 382–384) who argues that Deut. 23:14 is a parable. He twice notes (*MF* 352, 383) that Maimonides states there that he “shall give reasons for the [biblical] text according to its external meaning,” which Stern identifies with its “parabolic external meaning.” But he overlooks the beginning of Maimonides statement “*I have already made known to you that I shall give reasons for the [biblical] text according to its external meaning,*” a clear reference to his discussion at the beginning of the chapter of an eye for an eye. As I argue at length in note 21, this cross reference clearly – I would dare say indubitably – shows that the contrast here is not between *zahir* and *batin*, but between *zahir* and *fiqh*.

²⁴ *The Guide of the Perplexed* vol. 2, trans. Michael Schwarz (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2002), 590, note 102.

is to commit a category mistake.²⁵ The only commandment that Maimonides views as a parable is the scapegoat, where it is easy to see how one can view the actions connected with this commandment symbolically.²⁶ But in all other cases Maimonides does not attempt to defend the *zahir* of these commandments by understanding them symbolically, à la Philo or Ralbag, but, again, by seeing them in their historical context and the like. Indeed, Maimonides tacitly polemicizes against seeing the commandments as parables. Thus, in *Guide* 3:43:572–573, Maimonides famously maintains that the Sages’ reasons for “the four species that constitute a *lulav*” “have [...] the status of poetical conceits; they are not intended to bring out the meaning of the text in question.” But what are those reasons? We know them well: the four species stand for four types of Jews or for four organs of the human body, or for Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, or for Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel, and Leah, and so on²⁷ – that is, they are parables. So, to interpret the commandments parabolically may make for an edifying sermon, but will not serve to “bring out the meaning of the text in question.”²⁸ The upshot of this is that, contrary to the *zahir* of the pearl lost in a dark house type of parable that Maimonides sets out to interpret²⁹ in the *Guide*, the *zahir* of the commandments does contain wisdom and does serve a purpose, and need and should not be justified by seeing it in parabolic fashion as a *zahir* performing the dual function of concealing and pointing to an underlying *batin*.

In sum, a key goal of the *Guide of the Perplexed* is to explain those parables and those commandments, where the *zahir*, the external sense, the *nigleh*, seems to lack

25 Here, again, I disagree with Stern, who in his book, *Problems and Parables of the Law: Maimonides and Nahmanides on Reasons for the Commandments* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), argues that Maimonides generally views the commandments as parables. I take issue with Stern’s contention in my review of his book in *AJS Review* 26 (2002): 361–364.

26 “Inasmuch as the he-goat that was sent forth into the wilderness served wholly to atone for great sins [...] it had to be removed to as great a distance as possible and sent forth unto a land that is cut off. [...] No one has any doubt that sins are not bodies may be transported from the back of one individual to that of another. But all these actions are parables serving to bring forth a form in the soul, so that a passion toward repentance should result: We have freed ourselves from all our previous actions, cast them behind our backs, and removed them to an extreme distance” (*Guide* 3:46:591)

27 See *Leviticus Rabbah* 30: 9–12 (on Lev. 23:40).

28 Stern (*MF* 352–355) discusses this passage, but misses the point that Maimonides is polemicizing here against those who assume that when the Sages offered their parabolic explanations of the reason for the four species they seriously “intended to bring out the meaning of the text in question.”

29 In *Guide* 3:50, Maimonides rounds out the section on the reason for the commandments (*Guide* 3:25–49) by explaining the reasons for those biblical stories “the telling of which is thought to be useless.” Maimonides, to the contrary, maintains that “all the stories that you will find mentioned in the Torah occur there for a necessary utility for the Law; either they give a correct notion of an opinion that is a pillar of the Law, or they rectify some action so that mutual wrongdoing and aggression should not occur between men” (*Guide* 3:50:613). But, again, as is the case with the commandments, Maimonides derives these lessons not by treating the stories as parables, but by a close examination of the narratives themselves.

wisdom. My analysis, thus, serves to defend and refine the traditional view of the *Guide* as a biblio-centric work, concerned primarily with the meta-philosophical problem of showing how those parts of the Bible, whether parables or commandments, that on the surface appear to lack wisdom, do, in fact, if read and understood properly, contain it, if in very different ways. As I stated towards the beginning of this essay, Stern objects to the view that the *Guide* concerned the meta-philosophical problem of the relation between philosophy and scriptural religion because it implies that “philosophy is something distinct from, and foreign to, Torah,” while, in truth, for Maimonides “the study of philosophy [...] was never foreign or external to Judaism or the Torah.” But, on my view, the *Guide* does not deal with the meta-philosophical problem of the relationship between philosophy and scriptural religion *in toto*, but with the apparent contradiction between philosophy and Scripture as the latter *appears on its surface*; his resolution is that a deeper understanding of Scripture shows there is no contradiction precisely because “philosophy is not something distinct from, and foreign to, Torah.”

While it is clear that the wisdom that Maimonides finds in the *zahir* of the commandments (as opposed to the *fiqh*) refers to its inculcating into the community, in ways he explains, both welfare of the soul and welfare of the body, it is not at all clear – and I have not touched on this – what is the pearl-like wisdom of the *batin* (or *batins*) of those parables that he discusses in the *Guide*, all, to repeat, parables of the pearl lost in a dark house type. Here, perhaps, we have the key example of Maimonides’ esotericism. My article, then, and I wish to emphasize this, does *not* seek to adjudicate between the dogmatic reading of the *Guide*, suggested, for example by Professor Herbert Davidson,³⁰ and the sceptical reading suggested by Professor Stern.³¹ In this sense, my article deals with the *form* of the *Guide* and *not* with its matter. But I hope that this modest task I have undertaken is not an unworthy one and that its value, even if it is not that of gold, at least is that of silver.³²

³⁰ Herbert Davidson, *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and *Maimonides the Rationalist* (Oxford: Littman Library/Oxford University Press, 2011).

³¹ I raise some critical questions about Stern’s more strictly philosophical/metaphysical arguments for a sceptical interpretation of the *Guide*, particularly with regard to Maimonides’ theory of divine attributes, in my essay “Thoroughly Modern Maimonides?” in *Jewish Review of Books* 5 (3) (2014): 12–15. For a recent thoughtful and nuanced critique of Stern’s reading, which, at the same time, appreciates the force of some of his arguments, see Alfred Ivry, *Maimonides’ Guide of the Perplexed: A Philosophical Guide* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 5–6, 37, 223–224, and 227–228.

³² This paper originated as a lecture that I delivered on January 24, 2017, at the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies – Jewish Scepticism of the University of Hamburg as part of the lecture series “Scepticism and Anti-Scepticism in Medieval Jewish Philosophy and Thought.” I would like to thank Univ.-Prof. Dr. Giuseppe Veltri, the Centre’s Director, and Jun. Prof. Dr. Racheli Haliva, the Centre’s Co-Director and organizer of the series, for their support and friendship. Professor Josef Stern was in the audience when I delivered the lecture, and his forceful but measured response to my criticisms of his understanding of Maimonides’ theory of parables stimulated me to clarify and refine

Selected Bibliography

- Cohen, Mordechai Z. "A Talmudist's Halakhic Hermeneutics: A New Understanding of Maimonides' Principle of Peshat Primacy." *JSIJ* 110 (2012): 257–359.
- Cohen, Mordechai Z. "Hermeneutical Terms, Moving Targets: On the Shifting Relationship between *Peshuto shel Miqra* and *Zahir al-Nass* in the Jewish Exegetical Tradition" (forthcoming).
- Davidson, Herbert. *Maimonides the Rationalist*. Oxford: Littman Library/Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Davidson, Herbert. *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Even-Shmuel, Yehudah. *Moreh Nevukhim*, vol. 1. Tel Aviv: Shvil, 1935.
- Ivry, Alfred. *Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed: A Philosophical Guide*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016.
- Jaffe, Mordecai. *Levush Pinat Yikrat*. Brooklyn: New York, 1967.
- Kaplan, Lawrence. "Rationalism and Rabbinic Culture in Sixteenth Century Eastern Europe: Rabbi Mordecai Jaffe's *Levush Pinat Yikrat*." PhD. diss., Harvard University, 1975.
- Kaplan, Lawrence. "Thoroughly Modern Maimonides?" *Jewish Review of Books* 5 (3) (2014): 12–15.
- Lorberbaum, Yair. "The Men of Knowledge and the Sages are Drawn, as it were, toward this Purpose by the Divine Will: On Understanding the Parable in the *Guide of the Perplexed*." *Tarbiz* 71 (2001–2002): 87–132 [Hebrew].
- Maimonides, Moses. *Moreh Nevukhim*. Translated by Samuel ibn Tibbon. Warsaw/Jerusalem: Isaac Goldman, 1872/1960.
- Maimonides, Moses. *The Guide of the Perplexed* Vol. 2. Translated by Michael Schwarz. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2002.
- Maimonides, Moses. *The Guide of the Perplexed*. Translated by Shlomo Pines. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963.
- Nuriel, Avraham. *Galui ve-Samui be-Pilosophiyyah ha-Yehudit bi-Yemei ha-Beynayyim*. Magnes Press. Jerusalem, 2000.
- Stern, Josef. *Problems and Parables of the Law: Maimonides and Nahmanides on Reasons for the Commandments*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998.
- Stern, Josef. *The Matter and Form of Maimonides' Guide*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013.
- Weiss, Roslyn. "Four Parables about Peshat as Parable." In *The Legacy of Maimonides*, edited by Yamin Levy and Shalom Carmy. Brooklyn: New York, Yashar (2006): 111–126.

my own approach to this subject. I benefitted as well from a very perceptive observation of Dr Daniel Davies. Dr Davies also served as a reader of my paper, together with Professor Warren Zev Harvey, and their thoughtful and incisive suggestions and criticisms led to a number of (in my view) important improvements.

Charles H. Manekin

Scepticism and Anti-Scepticism: The Case of Maimonides

The study of medieval scepticism, at least under that rubric, is relatively recent, and has gained less attention than that of ancient or modern scepticism.¹ Although one can find claims and arguments that are reminiscent of arguments associated with self-identified sceptics, “no thinker from the Middle Ages professed an active allegiance to a systematic philosophical scepticism.”² Moreover, neither ancient scepticism nor early modern scepticism seems to me to be a particularly appropriate lens with which to look at the medievals. While the ancient sceptics investigated the truth of beliefs (one translation of *skepsis* is investigation) and recommended suspension of belief wherever possible since those investigations often proved inconclusive, the early modern sceptics were more concerned to examine the grounds for our knowledge-claims, to see which of those claims were justified and which were not.³ Neither project seems particularly relevant to medieval philosophy, which has its own forms of scepticism, especially in regards to the claims of philosophy vs. religion.

While there is no systematic scepticism in the Middle Ages, sceptical arguments are occasionally employed to weaken or devalue particular positions in the service of theological concerns. Such arguments are often local and focus on a particular problem, which is the case with Maimonides, as we shall see. To be sure, there can be some interesting parallels between the philosophical moves taken by medievals and, say, their ancient and early modern counterparts. It is hard to read Avicenna’s Flying Man argument without thinking of Descartes, or al-Ghazālī’s arguments against causation without thinking of Hume. But attempts to trace direct or indirect lines of influence are rarely convincing. As Tanelli Kukkonen has written, “Pace Lovejoy, ideas are not units that would or indeed could be passed on from one thinker and culture to the next without a need for creative appropriation and transformation at the very core.”⁴ Kukkonen also points out that there is a danger of apologetics, i.e., that our medieval philosopher deserves to be recognized as a solitary genius because

1 On this, see Henrik Lagerlund, *Rethinking the History of Skepticism: The Missing Medieval Background*, Studien Und Texte Zur Geistesgeschichte Des Mittelalters, (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 1–29.

2 See Charles Bolyard, “Medieval Skepticism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/skepticism-medieval/>.

3 Ibid.

4 See Tanelli Kukkonen, “Al-Ghazālī’s Skepticism Revisited,” in Lagerlund, *Rethinking the History of Skepticism*, 29–59, esp. 30.

Note: I would like to acknowledge the helpful comments of both anonymous reviewers.

certain of their arguments sound to our ears like those of Descartes or Hume or Kant. Given the attraction of ancient and early modern scepticism for historians of philosophy in recent years, there is an understandable lure to find medieval counterparts. This is well and good, provided that the distinctiveness of the medieval scepticisms is recognized.

Let me illustrate this last point with a passage from al-Ghazālī's spiritual autobiography, *The Rescuer from Error*, which has often been seen as anticipating Descartes. I will then contrast this passage with something similar in Maimonides, setting off al-Ghazālī's scepticism with Maimonides' anti-scepticism. Al-Ghazālī informs us that it was within his God-given temperament to search for certain knowledge (*'ilm yaqīnī*) of the way things really are, but first he had to know of what certain knowledge consisted. "Certain knowledge," he writes, "is that in which what is known is laid bare in such a way as to leave no room for doubt, and is unaccompanied by the possibility of error or illusion, to the point that the mind cannot even suppose such a possibility."⁵ After examining his beliefs, al-Ghazālī posited that the only two candidates for certain beliefs were sensory beliefs and necessary beliefs, what we would call rational beliefs. But could he trust his senses? After all, vision looks at a celestial body and sees that it is small, but geometrical proofs indicate that it is far larger than the earth. Rational proofs undermine our belief in inferences from the senses, and so maybe only necessary beliefs are to be considered trustworthy. But Al-Ghazālī then informs us that he couldn't rule out the possibility that just as necessary beliefs had shaken his trust in sensory beliefs, so some unknown mode of cognition could shake his trust in necessary beliefs. He couldn't defeat this possibility with a proof, because that would involve relying on inference from first principles of knowledge, and precisely these he questioned. For two months, he embraced this sophisticated, i.e., sceptical creed, until he was illumined by a Divine light that allowed him to trust the necessary truths, which were not themselves susceptible of proof. Now it is possible to read Al-Ghazālī as saying merely that first principles are not susceptible of demonstration, which is, of course, what Aristotle himself says in the *Posterior Analytics*. But in referring to the Divine light, he clearly wishes to distinguish his approach from that of the philosophers, even in those areas of knowledge with which the philosophers provide certain knowledge, according to Al-Ghazālī, such as logic, mathematics, and astronomy. He wishes to emphasize that what relieved his bout with scepticism was his recognition of the Divine light within his soul. The emphasis is reminiscent of, yet differs from, Descartes, who demonstrates the existence of a non-deceiving deity in order to guarantee the certain knowledge (*scientia*) achieved through his clear and distinct perceptions.

5 Al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-dalāl wa-al-muwaṣṣil ilā Dhī al-'alā wa-al-Jalāl*, eds Jamīl Ṣalībā, and Kāmil 'Ayyād (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1967): 74. Translated in Muhammad Ali Khalidi. *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 61.

Now let us consider a passage in Maimonides' Introduction to the *Commentary on the Mishnah* that starts from the same question about the size of the heavenly bodies, in this case, the sun.⁶ Suppose, Maimonides says, that the following question is posed to a scholar who is well-versed in the sciences of medicine, arithmetic, and music, and proficient in the natural sciences, "quick-witted of mind, excellent in disposition" but ignorant of the sciences of geometry and astronomy: "What would you say to a man who says that the sun, which we see as a small disk in the sky is actually $166 \frac{3}{8}$ times the size of the earth?" Such a scholar, Maimonides informs us, would find no place in his mind to affirm that belief. This intellectual claim would appear at first to him as absurd. How can a man who occupies a tiny place on earth know the measure of the solar body, its circumference and area, to the extent that his mind encompasses it as if were a terrestrial body? How is it possible for a heavenly body so far away, which somebody on earth can barely look at, be measure to the precision of $\frac{3}{8}$? But when such a scholar delves into the books of measurement, learns what is appropriate for a spherical shape, and masters the *Almagest*, then this proposition would become for an *indubitable truth for which there is a demonstration* (*qaul ṣaḥiḥ lā shaqq fiḥi qad qāma alayhi al-burhān*). And the claim that the sun is of this size would be no different for him then the claim that it exists. Now, Maimonides, like Al-Ghazālī, holds that the science of astronomy provides certain knowledge. But unlike Al-Ghazālī, he makes no appeal to a Divine light to ground his first principles. And this is because, again, unlike Al-Ghazālī, he generally finds no need to distance himself from the philosophers with respect to their basic epistemological outlook.

In fact, the example that Maimonides gives is particularly interesting because he uses it to illustrate the fact that what may seem at first glance to be absurd can, after further study, be considered the absolute truth. He says this with reference to the *prima facie* strangeness of rabbinic aggadah. So unlike Al-Ghazālī, who appeals to the Divine light to defeat sophistry or scepticism, Maimonides uses an example from the *prima facie* unlikely science of astronomy to argue that rabbinic aggadah should not be dismissed, but rather should be interpreted whenever possible, and when not possible, the problem should be attributed not to the sages but to ourselves, just like the scholar in the story who could not understand how the size of the sun could be measured. Understanding astronomy resolves the perplexity of the man in the example, just as understanding geometry resolves the perplexity of one who is told that asymptotic lines becomes increasingly close to each other without ever meeting, something that the imagination is unable to conceive.⁷

⁶ See *Haqdamot ha-Rambam la-Mishnah*, ed. Isaac Shailat (Jerusalem: Ma'aliyot, 1992): 53–54 (Hebrew), 450–451 (Arabic).

⁷ For this example, see *Guide* 1.73, trans. Shlomo Pines in *The Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963): 210 [henceforth, trans. Pines]. Cf. Gad Freudenthal, "Maimonides's Philosophy of Science," in the *Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, ed. Kenneth M. Seeskin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 134–166, esp. 136–138.

Now in the Introduction to the *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Maimonides does not call astronomy explicitly a certain science. But in Maimonides' *Letter to the Sages of Montpellier*, also known as the *Letter against Astrology*, which was composed after Maimonides wrote the *Guide*,⁸ the science of astronomy is referred to as a *ḥokhmah vada'it*, a "certain science," which appears to be the equivalent of the Arabic phrase, 'ilm yaqīnī. After listing the various subjects considered in astronomy he writes, "All this is true without a doubt."⁹ This positive appreciation of the science of astronomy, to which I will return later, conforms to what he wrote earlier in the *Code of Law*, that one can rely on the books of geometry and astronomy in the hands of the gentile sages, "since all these matters [are confirmed] through clear proofs that are unblemished and cannot be doubted."¹⁰ The term "clear proofs" in the *Code of Law* appears to be equivalent to the Arabic term *burhan*, "demonstration," in the *Guide*. So, provisionally, we can say that what makes astronomy a certain science is that it is confirmed through demonstrations that are indubitable. If this is the case, then, both before and after writing the *Guide*, Maimonides considered astronomy to be an 'ilm yaqīnī, a certain and demonstrable science.

But what of astronomy in the *Guide*? Does Maimonides consider it there to be a certain science, and, if he does, what are its scientific claims? And, more broadly, what are his views towards cosmology and celestial physics? Much has been written on the subject,¹¹ but it is still worth going over some of the main points.

First, it is important to emphasize that Maimonides regards the teachings of the philosophers, including those having to do with the configurations of the heavens, as in accordance, generally, with those of the Torah. This is clear from the beginning of the *Code of Law* and throughout the *Guide*, where Maimonides identifies the Account of the Chariot and the Account of Creation with metaphysics and physics, respectively. There are also explicit statements, notably in *Guide* 1.71, and *Guide* 2.3–13, that indicate that Maimonides considers key notions of Aristotelian cosmology as having

⁸ See *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, ed. Isaac Shailat, 474–510. According to a personal communication to the editor, Joseph Kafih claimed that the letter was a forgery; see *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, 476, n. 4. Shailat himself considers it genuine and that it was originally written in Hebrew, *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, 476, n. 5, duly noting that in one of the manuscripts it is considered to be translated from an Arabic original by Moses ibn Tibbon. Herbert A. Davidson, *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005): 497, considers there to be "strong, if not overwhelming" grounds for rejecting the letter as a forgery. These questions deserve greater study.

⁹ *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, 482.

¹⁰ Mishneh Torah, Laws Concerning the Sanctification of the New Moon 17:24.

¹¹ On this see Gad Freudenthal, "'Instrumentalism' and 'Realism' as Categories in the History of Astronomy: Duhem vs. Popper, Maimonides vs. Gersonides," *Centaurus* 45 (2003): 227–248. Y. Tzvi Langermann, "The True Perplexity: The *Guide of the Perplexed* Part II, Chapter 24," in *Perspectives on Maimonides: Philosophical and Historical Studies*, edited by J. L. Kraemer (Oxford: Littman Library/Oxford University Press, 1991): 159–174, and Josef Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides' "Guide"* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013): 54–167.

been demonstrated, or as “clear upon reflection,” such as the existence of celestial orbs, their possessing souls, intellect, and desire, and their differing from one another regarding velocity and speed. Some of Aristotle’s speculations concerning the causes of the motions of the spheres are not demonstrated, but they occasion the smallest number of doubts and are the most fitting for being put into a coherent order – and they are in harmony with many sayings of the Law and the midrashim, another point in their favour.¹² True, Aristotle is not infallible: he mistakenly thought that every motion requires a separate orb, which subsequently was shown by astronomers to be false.¹³ But the evidence is considerable that Maimonides accepts the Aristotelian picture of the cosmos basically as true and considers it to agree with that of the Torah, as correctly interpreted. This is part of Maimonides’ general tendency to “bring together the Torah and the intelligible.”¹⁴

Yet in a half-dozen consecutive chapters of the *Guide*, Maimonides subjects Aristotle’s celestial science to a barrage of criticism, ending with the sweeping generalization that “everything that Aristotle expounds with regard to the orb of the moon, and that which is above it, is, except for certain things, a sort of intuition and conjecture,”¹⁵ that is to say, not necessarily true, much less demonstrated. Later he writes, “regarding all that is in the heavens, man grasps nothing but a small measure of what is mathematical [...] the deity alone fully knows the true reality, the nature, the substance, the form, the motions, and the causes of the heavens.”¹⁶

What are the implications of Maimonides’ criticism of Aristotelian celestial science for his anti-sceptical stance? Before answering we should first note that Maimonides provides two distinct considerations for limiting human knowledge of the heavens in the *Guide* – their remoteness and their being the product of divine particularization.

The “remoteness”-consideration says that because the heavens are “remote in distance and in rank” from us, we are unable *in principle* to have scientific knowledge of them. According to Aristotle, one has scientific knowledge (*epistēmē*) of something when one knows it through its necessitating causes/explanations.¹⁷ The sort of demonstrations that provide scientific knowledge or understanding require that the premises be explanatory of the conclusion. Now Maimonides claims that the causes of heavenly phenomena that would serve as premises for our inferences are inaccessible to us because the heavens are too remote in distance and in rank. Remoteness in distance seems to exclude making the observations necessary for scientific knowledge;

¹² *Guide* 1.3, 254.

¹³ *Guide* 1.4, 257.

¹⁴ The phrase is from the *Treatise on the Resurrection of the Dead* in *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, ed. I. Shai-lat, 330 (Arabic), 461 (Hebrew).

¹⁵ *Guide* 2.23, 319–320.

¹⁶ *Guide* 2.24, 327.

¹⁷ Posterior Analytics 1.2, 71b10–15.

remoteness in rank seems to exclude the possibility of any knowledge of the *essence* of the heavens. The “remoteness”-consideration poses an insurmountable obstacle for any theory of celestial science that wishes to fulfil the criteria of Aristotelian *epistēmē*.

But, as Deborah Black has shown, when Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics* was translated into Arabic, the term *epistēmē* was rendered by the term *yaqīn*, “certainty.”¹⁸ The Arabic Aristotelians, basing themselves on Aristotle’s distinction between knowing the fact of the matter (*to hoti*) and knowing the explanation of the matter (*to dioti*),¹⁹ distinguish two types of demonstrations, explanatory demonstrations (*burhān lima*) and factual demonstrations (*burhān inna* or *anna*). Al-Fārābī and Avicenna both hold that factual demonstrations yield *ilm yaqīnī*, and Avicenna expressly disputes with an unnamed predecessor who claims that there is no certainty when the cause is unknown.²⁰ Since only explanatory demonstrations proceed from causal premises, only they appear to be definitively excluded by the “remoteness”-consideration. Factual demonstrations, i.e., reasoning from effects to causes, are not thereby excluded. And since Maimonides *does* hold that some facts about the heavens are demonstrated, it seems that these demonstrations are factual and not explanatory. Maimonides read Aristotle in Arabic and with the Arabic commentators. There is no reason to suspect that Aristotle’s notion of *epistēmē* played a role in his own epistemology.

When the remoteness of the heavens is understood as one of rank, then the remoteness-consideration in the *Guide* is reminiscent of Maimonides’ view in his *Code of Law* that entities occupying a certain rank in the hierarchy of being are not able to know entities occupying a higher rank as they really are, or fully, but they are able to know them. Thus, angels are said to know/apprehend their creator but not fully. Even the first rank [of intellect] cannot apprehend the truth of the Creator as He is; rather, its knowledge is unable to apprehend and to know [Him], but it apprehends and knows more than what the form below it apprehends and knows. All the intellects know God but none know Him as He knows Himself. Maimonides adds that all the stars and planets, which possess intellect and souls, know God, each according to its rank, like the angels, but not as He knows himself. Their knowledge is less than

18 Deborah Black, “Knowledge (‘Ilm) and Certitude (Yaqīn) in Al-Fārābī’s Epistemology,” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 16 (2006): 11–45, esp. 13–15.

19 *Posterior Analytics* 1.13, 78a23–29.

20 Charles H. Manekin, “Maimonides and the Arabic Aristotelian Tradition of Epistemology,” in *Beyond Religious Borders: Interaction and Intellectual Exchange in the Medieval Islamic World*, ed. David M. Freidenreich and Miriam Goldstein (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012): 78–91, 192–197, esp. 85 where Avicenna states that the position of his opponent “implies that there will be no certainty with respect to the Creator, may His name be Exalted, because there is no cause of His existence! We must inform him that he has lost his way in the pursuit of science, for he lacks the thing for the sake of which wisdom is sought, namely, certainty with respect to the Creator, may His highness be Exalted.”

that of the angels and greater than that of human beings.²¹ Each rank in the hierarchy knows itself as the effect of the superior cause, and so it reasons from itself as effect to its cause. It cannot know the higher rank “as it truly is,” i.e., through its cause. There is nothing particularly sceptical in itself about this medieval Aristotelian limitation on human knowledge.

The “Divine particularization” -consideration limiting our knowledge of the heavens appears in *Guide* 2.24, where Maimonides argues that world is the product of Divine will and particularization rather than natural necessity. His task in that chapter is to describe to the reader “the grave doubts that would affect whoever thinks that man has acquired knowledge as to the motions of the spheres and as to their being natural things going on *according to the law of necessity*, things whose order and arrangement are clear.”²² The grave doubts arise when one thinks that the motions of the spheres proceed *according to the law of* [natural] necessity, and not according to the Divine will. This is what Maimonides wants to avoid, because it implies *inter alia* that God is unable to suspend even temporarily the natures of things, a consequence that Maimonides labels “disgraceful.”²³

That Maimonides’ goal in *Guide* 2.24 is the modest one of weakening the Aristotelian case for necessity rather than reflecting a broad epistemological scepticism can be seen in what he accepts of Aristotelian cosmology in the very chapter in which it is attacked. For example, he holds that the uniform motion of the orb around the centre of the earth “has been made clear to those who use reasoning,” but that thesis is incompatible with the existence of epicycles and eccentrics. One could reject the existence of the latter, but then the problem of accounting for planetary motion, the “true perplexity,” would remain unsolved. Had Aristotle later become convinced of the existence of epicycles and eccentrics – and Maimonides raises this possibility hypothetically – he would himself have been perplexed. Seeing no way out of the perplexity, Maimonides invokes the “remoteness”-consideration and concludes that these matters cannot be grasped by human reasoning but only via prophetic revelation. But his target at the end of the chapter is still very much the theologically problematic picture of the Aristotelians. Take away the problem of the world proceeding necessarily from a God who could not choose otherwise; make your goal understanding God’s wisdom to the best of your ability; utilize the best insights of Torah and philosophy to learn about the cosmos, and it appears that we can get very far in our inquiries about the heavens.

But how far can we go in our inquiries, given that the “divine particularization”-consideration seems to posit an unbridgeable ontological chasm between phenomena that exist because of Divine will and those that exist because of natural

²¹ Cf. Laws concerning the Foundation of the Torah, 2.8, 10; 3.9.

²² *Guide* 2.23, 222.

²³ *Guide* 2.22, 319.

necessity? According to Gad Freudenthal, “the action of the Deity is visible in ‘pockets’ of contingency or indeterminacy existing within natural necessity.”²⁴ If this is the correct description of such pockets, then they are unknowable. Yet there is nothing indeterminate or contingent in phenomena such as the direction of the movements of the heavenly bodies, or the position of the planets, certainly not in the sense of arbitrary, nor is there an ontological chasm between willed and naturally necessitated phenomena. Maimonides believes that all of creation, *including* the sublunar realm, is ultimately the result of divine particularization, purpose, and will, just as he believes that all of creation, including the celestial realm, operates the way it does because of the natures that God has implanted within it. The movements of the heavens are as necessary, i.e., determined by God to act in a uniform manner, as are the movements of sublunar elements. Perhaps we can say that, according to Maimonides, God wills the world to come to be in such a way that certain phenomena – the sublunar and, perhaps, some celestial ones – can be understood as the naturally necessitated effects of some other phenomena, which are the direct result of God’s voluntary agency. Thus, while all phenomena are purposed to exist, one can only have explanations of sublunar phenomena because they are necessitated from the celestial phenomena, i.e., the phenomena that are determined by God’s will consequent upon his wisdom. There is no need to posit an ontological chasm between the different sorts of phenomena.

If there are celestial phenomena that are the direct result of purposeful particularization, and Maimonides says that they are, then they cannot be scientifically known, i.e., explained, in the strict Aristotelian sense of science. Shouldn’t the “Divine purpose”-consideration be an even stronger limitation on human knowledge than the “remoteness”-consideration? In principle, perhaps; in practice, no, and that for two reasons: First, Maimonides does not have an independent argument for considering certain celestial phenomena to be the result of divine particularization; he only arrives at that conclusion after he has rejected as implausible the alternatives, which are either that a naturalistic explanation exists at present or that it can be achieved after further study. Second, all of Maimonides’ examples of particularization are in the celestial realm, which we cannot know with explanatory knowledge *in any event* because of the “remoteness” consideration. Once again, the “Divine purpose” consideration does not really limit our knowledge; we are still able to ascertain, with certainty and near-certainty, elements of Divine wisdom. Aristotle’s inadequacies are emphasized here to preserve the world as the product of Divine choice.

Is the *Guide*’s “scepticism” regarding knowledge of the heavens Maimonides’ last word on the subject? Let us return to the *Letter against Astrology*:

²⁴ Gad Freudenthal, “Maimonides’ Philosophy of Science,” in the *Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, ed. Kenneth M. Seeskin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 134–166, esp. 141.

Know, my masters, that the science of the stars that is a certain science is knowledge of the form of the spheres, their number, their measure, the course they follow, each one's period of revolution, their declination to the north or to the south, their revolving to the east or to the west, and the orbit of every star and what its course is. This is an exceedingly glorious science. On all this and the like, the wise men of Greece, Persia, and India wrote compositions. By means of it, the onset of the eclipses of luminaries may be known and when they will be eclipsed at any given place; by means of it there may be known the cause for the moon's appearing just like a bow, then waxing great until it is full, and then gradually waning; by means of it there may be known when the moon will or will not be seen; and the reason why one day will be long and another day short; and the reason why two stars will rise as one, but not set together; and the reason why a given day at a given place is thirteen hours long and in another place fifteen or sixteen or twenty hours long, yet being a single day [...] How many wondrous matters are known by this science, all of which are undoubtedly true.²⁵

While some of this description may be accounted for by the “instrumentalist” view taken of astronomy in the *Guide*, which states that astronomers posit heavenly motions in order simply to account for our observations, “regardless of whether or not things are thus in fact,”²⁶ phrases like “knowledge of the *form* of the spheres, their number, the course they follow [...] their revolving to the east or the west [...] the *cause* of the moon's appearing just like a bow, then waxing great until it is full and then gradually waning,” etc., and calling many of the propositions of astronomy to be “undoubtedly true” suggest none of the doubts that Maimonides alluded to concerning the heavens in the chapters on creation in the *Guide*. And he makes no mention of the “instrumentalist” view familiar from the *Guide*.

Of course, we could reconcile the *Guide* and the *Letter Against Astrology* by saying that, when Maimonides considers astronomy to be a certain science in the *Letter*, he is referring to a very small part of it, i.e., to mathematical astronomy, which is of no value in determining how things really are, but only how they appear to us. We could also rightly point out that the *Letter* emphasizes the scientific value of astronomy to contrast it with a pseudo-science like astrology.²⁷ But a more likely explanation for the discrepancy is simply that Maimonides emphasizes the difficulties of celestial science in the context of his argument for a Divine particularizer who creates the world after absolute nothingness. This suggestion was put forth by Shlomo Pines in his introduction to his translation of the *Guide* of the Perplexed:

It is not impossible that in this second part [of the *Guide*] Maimonides gave a rather exaggerated expression to whatever qualms he may have had about the science of astronomy of his time. This overemphasis may be explained by his wishing to shake the confidence of a certain category of

²⁵ In *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, ed. I. Shailat, 482.

²⁶ *Guide* 2.24, 326.

²⁷ One mistake would be to classify the *Letter Against Astrology*, if genuine, as a popular letter, written for the run of the mill rabbinic scholars, and therefore not to be taken seriously as representative of Maimonides' own teachings. Maimonides considered the sages of Lunel a target audience for the *Guide of the Perplexed*, since he authorized a Hebrew translation for that group.

readers in the philosophic doctrine of the eternity of the world, a confidence that was certainly connected with belief in the trustworthiness of Greek science in general. In 1.72, where he sums up the main points of physical science and astronomy, he seems to accept the Ptolemaic system and gives the reader no hint that he regards it as dubious.²⁸

Not only in 1.72 but elsewhere in Part Two of the *Guide*, Maimonides accepts fundamental elements of Arabic Aristotelian cosmology, and, as we have seen, even where he concedes that Aristotle lacks demonstrations for some of his opinions – such as the causes of the motions of the spheres – he argues that it is reasonable to accept them because they occasion the smallest number of doubts compared to alternative explanations, especially when they accord with the sayings of the Laws and the interpretations of the Midrashim. Emphasizing the inadequacies of Aristotle's explanation appears solely to refute the thesis that the world proceeds necessarily from the Divine nature.

Maimonides' stress on the doubts that accompany the eternity thesis fits nicely into what he terms his "rhetorical mode of speech" in his argument against Aristotle, for which he seeks indulgence from the readers of the *Guide*.²⁹ When he uses the phrase, he specifically refers to his practice of citing authorities, but he also seeks indulgence elsewhere for setting out the doubts that accompany Aristotle's opinion.³⁰ And that "rhetorical mode of speech" is on full display when he claims that "even the general conclusion that may be drawn from [the heavens], namely that they prove the existence of their Mover, is a matter the knowledge of which cannot be reached by human intellects."³¹ This claim has puzzled readers of the *Guide* since the time of Samuel Ibn Tibbon.³² Does Maimonides mean that the existence of the heavens does not prove the existence of God? What of his claim that "all the prophets used the stars and the spheres as proofs for the deity's existing necessarily"? Yet, *within the rhetoric of the argument against the Aristotelian doctrine of eternity*, the passage makes perfect sense. The Aristotelians may have a "cogent argument" for the existence of the Deity, but it rests on a premise – the eternal motion of the sphere – that implies a disgraceful conclusion for the Deity: that the world proceeds necessarily from Him and not as a result of His will. Given the remoteness of the heavens in place and in rank and our inability to adequately account for certain celestial phenomena through demonstration, we cannot rely on that premise to prove the existence of a First Mover *in the manner of the Aristotelians*. But this does not call into question either Maimonides' own "constructive dilemma" proof for the existence of God, nor that of the prophets,

²⁸ Pines, "Translator's Introduction," in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, cxi, n. 89.

²⁹ *Guide* 2.24, 322.

³⁰ *Guide* 2.22, 320.

³¹ *Guide* 2.24, 327.

³² For a recent symposium on the passage, see the contributions in *Aleph* 8 (2008): 151–358

neither of which are based on an adequate grasp of celestial natures.³³ And it does not close the door to advancing in our knowledge of the heavens.³⁴

Limitations on human knowledge elsewhere in the *Guide*

In other places in the *Guide* where Maimonides emphasizes the limitation of human knowledge we should continue to look for local, contextual explanation rather than evidence of a general sceptical tendency. In recognizing the limitations of human knowledge Maimonides believes that he is squarely within the tradition of the philosophers:

Do not think that what we have said with regard to the insufficiency of the human intellect and its having a limit at which it stops is a statement made in order to conform to Law. For it is something that has already been said and truly grasped by the philosophers without their having concern for a particular doctrine or opinion. And it is a true thing that cannot be doubted except by an individual ignorant of what has already been demonstrated.³⁵

The philosophers, in this case, the Arabic Aristotelians, teach that the human intellect is limited, and that the failure to appreciate these limits may indeed be the cause of holding false beliefs or beliefs without sufficient warrant. With the exception of the doctrines of creation, prophecy, providence, and divine knowledge of particulars, all issues of importance for the foundations of the Law, Maimonides generally sides with the Arabic Aristotelians, as he understands them.³⁶

³³ It is instructive to compare Maimonides' inference from the limitations on human knowledge with that of Kant. For Kant, the question of creation vs. eternity is an antinomy of human reason, one for which there are of necessity cogent arguments on both sides, and hence, undecidable. In a very un-Kantian manner, Maimonides employs the opposing cogent arguments for his own "constructive dilemma" demonstration for the existence of God.

³⁴ On this see Y. Tzvi Langermann, "My Truest Perplexities," *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism*, 8 (2008): 301–317.

³⁵ *Guide* 1.31, 67.

³⁶ Cf. his important, if somewhat obscure, statement in *Guide* 1.71, 177: "As for the Andalusians among the people of our nation, all of them cling to the affirmations of the philosophers and incline to their opinions, in so far as these do not ruin the foundation of the Law. You will not find them in any way taking the paths of the Mutakallimum. In many things concerning the scanty matter of which the later ones among them had knowledge, they have therefore approximately the same doctrine that we set forth in this Treatise." It is not clear to whom Maimonides refers, and, certainly, as Kraemer points out, his characterisation is not true of all Andalusian Jewish thinkers. (See Joel Kraemer, "Maimonides and the Spanish Aristotelianism School," in *Christians, Muslims, and Jews in Medieval and Early Modern Spain: Interaction and Cultural Change*, eds. Mark D. Meyerson and Edward D. English [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999], 40–68, esp. 41.) But what is important is that

That includes, by the way, his doctrine of the attributes, which is close to that of Avicenna.³⁷ There is no evidence that he believes that his doctrine of attributes deviates from those of the philosophers; his criticisms are directed against the Kalam, especially the Mu‘tazila³⁸ who identified God’s attributes with His essence. We saw above that Maimonides holds that the denial of essential attributes to God is a primary intelligible that needs to be proved by the “men of science” only when people have committed errors or have some other end in view. That God cannot be defined is “well-known among all people engaged in speculation.”³⁹ And “all the philosophers” say, “We are dazzled by His beauty, and He is hidden from us because of the intensity with which he becomes manifest, just as the sun is hidden to eyes that are too weak to apprehend it”?⁴⁰ At least within his self-perception, Maimonides comes down squarely on the side of the philosophers on the question of the Divine attributes.⁴¹

Maimonides also emphasizes that humans are limited in their ability to know the secrets of Divine science by virtue of their corporeality: “Matter is a strong veil preventing the apprehension of that which is separate from matter as it truly is.”⁴² Matter here refers to *all* matter, including the incorruptible and everlasting matter of

Maimonides views himself as following an Andalusian Jewish tradition of accepting the philosophers’ views when they do not ruin the foundations of the law. As one of the readers of this paper pointed out, Maimonides and the philosophers share much in common on the question of prophecy.

37 Cf. Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing* trans., introd. and annot., Michael Marmura (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2005): 8.4.13, 276: “The First, hence, has no quiddity [...] He is pure existence with the condition of negating privation and all other descriptions of him.”

38 Like Maimonides (*Guide* 1.60 and 1.68) Avicenna holds *both* that all descriptions are negated of the First, *and* that the First is an intellect, an intellecting subject, and an intelligible, without that implying multiplicity. (*Guide*, 8.6. secs.7–8, 285). These two positions are compatible. For a different reading of Avicenna and Maimonides, see Pines, Translator’s Introduction, xcvi. Maimonides’ cites the latter position as “generally admitted” by the philosophers; there is no indication that he disagrees with the philosophers, and in the Laws Concerning the Foundations of the Torah 2:10 he states it outright.

39 *Guide* 1.52, 115.

40 *Guide* 1.59, 139.

41 Harry Austryn Wolfson argued that Maimonides parts company with the “generality” of Arabic philosophers on the question of divine attributes: according to Maimonides they are to be taken as equivocal terms; according to the Arabic philosophers, they are to be taken as ambiguous. See “Maimonides and Gersonides on Divine Attributes as Ambiguous Terms,” rept. in Harry A. Wolfson, *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977): 231–246, esp. 235. In fact, Arabic philosophers like Avicenna and Averroes do consider terms like “intellect” and “knowledge” to be equivocal with respect to God and others, and it is not at all clear whether Maimonides would have rejected their interpretation of *per prius et posterius* ambiguous attributes, since he does not consider that interpretation, certainly not directly. Scholars who attempt to portray Maimonides’ theory of attributes as more “radical” or “neoplatonic” than his Aristotelian predecessors rarely confront the fact that he often adopts their doctrines (e.g., the view that God is intellecter, intellection, and intelligible, that He is cause of the world, that through knowing Himself He knows things external to himself) without directing his criticism against their treatment of attributes.

42 *Guide* 3.9, 436.

the celestial orbs. And if the matter of the orbs prevents the apprehension of that which is separate from matter as it truly is, *a fortiori* the corruptible matter of humans. Even the prophets, whose matter is the purest possible in the sublunar realm,⁴³ are subject to its limitations and its vagaries. Moses, after his moral and intellectual virtues had been perfected, was unable to apprehend God in His true reality because he was a living human, i.e., “an intellect belonging to matter,” an “inseparable human intellect.” He was unable to truly able to apprehend God, i.e., “to acquire of the truth of [God’s] existence in his soul that which other existing things do not share with this Existent so that [God’s] existence would be in his soul firm and separate from what existed in his soul of other existing things.”⁴⁴ Moses could understand “a little less than this,” namely, all of God’s actions and creation.⁴⁵ That would appear to include, for Moses, the celestial as well as the sublunar realm, including some of those celestial phenomena that were unsatisfactorily explained by the Aristotelians.

However, holding that human knowledge is *limited in scope* does not rule out considerable knowledge of the celestial bodies and the separate intellects, of which knowledge there are various degrees, as we have just seen. To be sure, there are some things that corporeal beings cannot know, but there are also limits on the knowledge of the separate intellects and the spheres, as we saw above. That doesn’t get in the way of their immortality.⁴⁶

Certain knowledge and the danger of doubt

Despite their limitations, humans can have *‘ilm yaqīnī*, according to Maimonides. What precisely does he mean by this phrase, and what role does it play in his epistemology? To my knowledge, the phrase *‘ilm yaqīnī* appears in the *Guide* twice,⁴⁷ but *yaqīn* occurs several times with *‘-l-m* (“knows”), and is a key term in Maimonides’ theory of knowledge. Samuel Ibn Tibbon, following his father Judah, translates *yaqīn* as *emet*,

⁴³ *Guide* 2.36, 369.

⁴⁴ Eight Chapters, ch. 7, in *Haqdamot ha-Rambam la-Mishnah*, ed. Isaac Shailat, 391 (Arabic), 142 (Hebrew). Cf. Laws Concerning the Foundations of the Torah, 1:10.

⁴⁵ *Guide* 1.21, and 1.38, 87.

⁴⁶ There is a further argument against the possibility of human intellects becoming immortal and that is that the intelligibles they acquire are derived from sense images, which does not apply for celestial beings. For an answer to this, see Herbert A. Davidson, *Maimonides the Rationalist* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2015), 173–211, esp. 206–210.

⁴⁷ *Guide* 2:46, 407, where once it becomes clear that a prophetic communication is a parable, one can have certain knowledge that it occurred in a vision of prophecy. The “parable condition” explains why Maimonides asserts in *Guide* 3.24 that the binding of Isaac actually occurred. For this issue see Howard T. Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 284–285. Another occurrence is in *Guide* 3.23, 492, when Job is said to know God with certain knowledge.

which, though not entirely adequate, at least captures the notion of truth. Maimonides occasionally brings truth and certainty together in the phrase *haqq yaqīn*, “truth and certainty.” The philosophers’ assertion that the spheres are living and rational is also *haqq yaqīn* from the standpoint of the Law.⁴⁸ A man should study obscure matters only after he has acquired true and certain premises and knows them.⁴⁹

Certain knowledge is associated by Maimonides in some passages with knowledge achieved through demonstration (*burhān*): In *Guide* 1.59, he writes that “a man sometimes labors for many years in order to understand some science and to know truly its propositions until he grasps them with certainty.” Note that the goal of scientific endeavour is to know truly the propositions of science *with certainty*. In *Guide* 3.51, he writes that among those who have

plunged into speculation concerning the fundamentals of religion [...] [there is one] [a] who has achieved demonstration, to the extent that it is possible, of everything that may be demonstrated, and [b] who has known for certain in divine matters, to the extent that it is possible, everything that may be known for certain, and [c] who has come close to certainty in those matters in which one can only come close to it.⁵⁰

It is possible to read [b] as a gloss on [a], but it is more likely an independent condition, since there are ways of achieving certain knowledge without demonstration, such as intuitive understanding of first principles. As we just saw, the denial of essential attributes to God is a primary intelligible, as is the existence of motion and the nonexistence of atoms. Were it not for the strange opinions and errors of those who assert the opposite, there would be no need to prove these positions. But in any case, demonstration appears to be a sufficient condition of certain knowledge.

As we shall see below, certain knowledge is not the only species of certainty. Maimonides allows for the certainty of the senses, for example, but sense-experience does not on its own provide the intellect with the intelligible. If the context is one of acquiring intelligibles, then Maimonides uses “certainty” or “certain belief” indistinguishably from “certain knowledge.” For example, in *Guide* 1.50, Maimonides distinguishes between (merely) professing correct opinions, actually believing them, and believing them with certainty: Belief is not the notion that is uttered, but rather, “the affirmation that what has been represented is outside the mind just as it has been represented in the mind.” A belief is certain when “together with this belief, it is realized that a belief different from it is in no way possible, and that no starting point can be found in the mind for a rejection of this belief.” And Maimonides promises his reader that, when he casts off desires and habits, becomes endowed with understanding (*fahm*), and reflects on what Maimonides will say in the following chapters with

⁴⁸ *Guide* 2.5, 259.

⁴⁹ *Guide* 1.5, 29.

⁵⁰ *Guide* 3.51, 619, with some alterations.

respect to distancing attributes from God, then he will of necessity achieve certainty regarding God's unity. And then, Maimonides continues, "you shall be one of those who represent to themselves God's unity [...] one of those who represent the Truth and apprehends it." Here, the context is knowledge of a foundation of the law, not the objects of our senses. So "certainty" in this context may be taken as synonymous with "certain knowledge."⁵¹

Elsewhere, I have compared Maimonides' characterization of certainty in the *Guide* to Al-Fārābī's *On the Conditions of Certainty* and his *Book of Demonstration*.⁵² According to Deborah Black, Al-Fārābī presents six conditions for certain knowledge: that a subject *S* believes a proposition *p*, that *p* is true, that *S* knows that *p* is true, that it is impossible that *p* not be true, that there is no time at which *p* can be false, and, finally, that these conditions hold essentially, not accidentally.⁵³ It is the latter condition, the non-accidentally condition, that I wish to consider briefly here.

When does certainty come about accidentally? According to Al-Fārābī, it happens when the first five conditions obtain, but either the person is unaware that they obtain, or they obtain through induction, or they obtain because of the renown and testimony of all people, or through the report of someone in whom the person has confidence, or simply because this opinion is favourable to the subject. In any of these cases, the subject thinks that he has proven this belief, but he has not. Only when the certainty arises because the subject has been led by a reliable process, i.e. a process that produces the subject's own vision of the truth, is there absolute certainty without qualification.⁵⁴

When Maimonides characterizes certainty in *Guide* 1.51, he does not mention what Al-Fārābī calls "accidental certainty." But he does mention it in the Dedicatory Epistle of the *Guide* when he writes to his student Joseph that he had never stopped urging him to approach matters in an orderly manner so that the truth should be established in his mind according to the proper methods, "and that certainty should not come to you by accident."⁵⁵ Only through an orderly, reliable process of education are beliefs acquired with absolute certainty, or what we may call *rational certainty*, i.e., certain knowledge.

Besides rational certainty, Maimonides speaks of two other kinds of certainty: sense-certainty and prophetic-certainty. With respect to sense-certainty, he holds that people cannot doubt what they have seen with their own eyes. The Law was given publicly at the Gathering of Sinai in order for the Israelites to acquire "certitude

⁵¹ Citations in this paragraph are from *Guide* 1.50, 111–112. Cf. Pines's translation of *tayaqqanta* as "you shall have certain knowledge."

⁵² Manekin, "Maimonides and the Arabic Aristotelian Tradition of Epistemology," 79–84.

⁵³ Black, "Knowledge ('Ilm) and Certitude (Yaqīn) in Al-Fārābī's Epistemology," 11–45.

⁵⁴ Black, 28–35.

⁵⁵ *Guide*, "Epistle Dedicatory," 4.

through sight.”⁵⁶ All miracles are certain in the case of one who sees them or their effects. Beliefs based on direct experience are true, but later traditional reports may be considered as untrue. The Torah had to enumerate the various stations where the Israelites encamped in order to fortify later generations’ acceptance of the story of the Miracle of the Manna.⁵⁷ Maimonides attributes the claim that the senses do not always bestow certainty and that they should not be trusted to the extent of adopting them as the principles of demonstration to the Kalam theologians; indeed, it is one of their principles.⁵⁸ His own view appears to be that the senses are generally trustworthy, although in some cases the testimony of the senses can be corrected or rejected on the basis of other knowledge, such as when a confirmed prophet claims to have been commanded by God to change the Law, which contradicts our certainty that the law is immutable, in which case we reject the prophetic claim and deem the prophet to be a false prophet, or when someone ill tastes the sweet as bitter and the bitter as sweet.

To say that certain knowledge is indubitable doesn’t mean that it is indubitable subjectively, i.e., only for the believer. It must be *objectively* indubitable because of the *rational nature* of the belief.⁵⁹ Thus, Maimonides prefaces his discussion in Part Three of the *Guide* with the claim that the texts of the prophetic books and the dicta of the Sages, together with the speculative premises he possesses, show him that his interpretation of the Account of the Chariot is, without a doubt, correct. But he concedes that things are possibly different, and that something else may be intended by scripture and the rabbis. After all, he has followed his conjecture and supposition without the benefit of divine revelation or a teacher. Here Maimonides is confident of his interpretation – he has no grounds to doubt it – but that is *not* the certainty to which he is referring in *Guide* 1.51, and, unsurprisingly, he doesn’t use the term “certainty” here. Nowhere is *rational* certainty mentioned in this discussion of scriptural hermeneutics, for obvious reasons. The fact that Maimonides has no reason to doubt his interpretation is not the same as saying that his interpretation represents, in his eyes, *ilm yaqīnī*. To say that a belief is indubitable but could possibly be false is simply to affirm a weaker sense of indubitability, one that has nothing to do with the indubitability of which Maimonides speaks in places like *Guide* 1.50.⁶⁰

Another passage may suggest that certainty received through prophecy is subjective, rather than objective. Maimonides states that Abraham’s receiving the message to sacrifice Isaac in a prophetic dream or vision teaches us the important lesson that

⁵⁶ *Guide* 3.24, 500.

⁵⁷ *Guide* 3.50, 615–616.

⁵⁸ *Guide* 1.73, 213–214.

⁵⁹ For objective certainty in Al-Fārābī and Maimonides, see Manekin, “Maimonides and the Arabic Aristotelian Tradition of Epistemology,” 79–81.

⁶⁰ For a different interpretation, which tends to epistemically devalue certainty, see Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides’ “Guide,”* 143–148.

the prophet does not doubt the message conveyed, despite its having been obtained through the intermediary of the imaginative faculty; had he doubted its truth, he would not have been so ready to follow the Divine command.⁶¹ Maimonides' point, as I read him, is that only in the cases of prophets can certain knowledge be obtained *despite the admixture of the imaginative faculty*. Abraham qua philosopher could be expected to doubt what he received in a dream because of the involvement of the imaginative faculty in the communication of the message. But this is something unique to *prophetic* communication. Were Abraham to share his dream with others, he could not produce within them the certainty he has, unless he did so through the proper, i.e., rational methods. By the way, nowhere does Maimonides say that everything that the prophet interprets has the status of certain truth. On the contrary, some of his statements appear to suggest that prophets may make mistakes.⁶²

Aside from its importance in the Arabic Aristotelian epistemological tradition, why is this rational certainty emphasized by Maimonides? Part of the answer may be found in Al-Fārābī's explanation of his third condition for certainty, i.e., that the knower know that his belief is true. Al-Fārābī states that, for one who knows with certainty, "the state of the intellect with respect to the intelligibles [...] comes to be like the state of vision with respect to the visible at the time of perception."⁶³ In certainty, not only has the mind acquired an intelligible, it has a reflexive awareness of this acquisition and the necessity of the intelligible being true which prevents it from doubting or disbelieving it.

What privileges the state of certainty epistemically is that it eliminates doubt and perplexity. And here we get to the crux of the Maimonides' anti-scepticism, his quite negative evaluation of doubt. Although doubts sometimes have pedagogic value in spurring students on to find new answers that will relieve their doubts, the condition of doubt is on the whole quite bad. Doubts are bad because they can lead people astray. Thus, Maimonides warns in his *Code of Law* against speculating on the foundations of religion by those who are easily led astray by doubts and false beliefs:

For Man's intellect is limited, and not all intellects are able to apprehend truth fully; thus, if every man follows his own thoughts, he will destroy his world according to his limited intellect. How? Sometimes he will stray after idolatry and sometimes he will think concerning the Creator's oneness, perhaps it is the case, perhaps it is not [...] *He doesn't know the procedures (middot) according to which one knows the truth fully, and hence he becomes a heretic.*⁶⁴

⁶¹ *Guide* 3.24. Medieval commentators disagreed whether the binding of Isaac took place entirely within a prophetic dream or vision, according to Maimonides. Cf. *Guide* 2.46. This question is not of relevance to the question of prophetic certainty.

⁶² On this point, see Daniel Davies, *Method and Metaphysics in Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 134–154.

⁶³ Cited in Black, "Knowledge ('Ilm) and Certitude (Yaqīn) in Al-Fārābī's Epistemology," 22.

⁶⁴ Mishneh Torah, Laws Concerning Idolatry 2:3.

Maimonides distinguishes between those who can apprehend the truth fully and those who cannot; the former lack the proper procedure according to which one comes to know the truth fully. Receiving doctrine on the basis of traditional teaching (*taqlid*) may be necessary for those who are at the beginning of their studies or who are not able to study, but, even if the tradition is correct, such beliefs are subject to doubt. Speculation concerning the foundations of religion is not just dangerous for the ignorant but also for the educated who engage in it. If they fall into error in the course of speculation or because they follow the authority of others who have fallen into error, they distance themselves from the truth, and it may be necessary to kill them and wipe out the traces of their opinion lest they not lead others astray. Learning the proper procedure is vital. Recall the passage in the Introduction that we noted earlier: “Yet I did not cease dissuading you from this and enjoining upon you to approach matters in an orderly manner. *My purpose in this was that the truth should be established in your mind according to the proper methods and that certainty should not come to you by accident.*” For Maimonides, then, certain knowledge, i.e., the knowledge that is established in the mind essentially and according to the proper methods, provides the *firm and rooted* experience of the intelligible, and that may be why the quest for certainty is an important part of Maimonides’ epistemological project.

It is not the *only* part of his project, since he allows for varying degrees of belief and epistemic appraisal, ranging from the possible to the near-certain and certain. In fact, what is most interesting to my mind about Maimonides’ epistemology is his acceptance of beliefs having to do with Divine science that are not demonstrated, those that occasion less grave doubts than do their opposing beliefs. Wisdom, according to Maimonides, is “the representation of truths as they really are, and the apprehension of all things that humans can apprehend.”⁶⁵ Now let us take the proposition “All things exist in virtue of the purpose of One who’s purposed.” Were Maimonides to limit wisdom to that which can be demonstrated or whose truth can be intuited, i.e., that which provides certain knowledge, then this proposition would be one of the things that cannot be known, except perhaps by virtue of prophetic tradition. If that were the case, one would expect, for example, Maimonides to end his discussion of the creation of the world in *Guide* 2.17, after he has argued that origin of the world – whether it is created or eternal – is a question that cannot be demonstrated, and that creation should be accepted on the basis of prophecy.⁶⁶ But he goes on to offer proofs

⁶⁵ *Haḳdamot ha-Rambam la-Mishnah*, 57 (Hebrew), 353 (Arabic)

⁶⁶ *Guide* 2.17, 294. Cf. Shem Tov ben Joseph ibn Shem Tov’s view that Maimonides’ doubts against Aristotle in *Guide* 2.19 are based on his (mis)identification of Aristotle’s views with those of Avicenna and Al-Fārābī, and that it would have been better had Maimonides just shown that neither the world’s eternity or its createdness can be demonstrated, that belief in creation is harmless, whereas belief in eternity destroys Divine omnipotence. See his commentary in Moses Maimonides, *Moreh Nevukhim* (Sabionetta: Foa, 1553), 49a. That Maimonides does not suspend his judgment, opting for a

approximating demonstrations on behalf of the purposer thesis.⁶⁷ These proofs do not produce certainty, but something close to it. The fact that Maimonides extends his epistemic approval to include things that can be known with near-certainty, such as the aforementioned proposition, *when the near-certainty is achieved by the proper method*, shows that he is actually more accepting of what can be known than those who limit knowledge to propositions that are in principle demonstrable. Of course, the proper method is important. The Kalām theologian believes that he has established the truth of Divine purpose, but his method is faulty because his proofs rest on false premises.⁶⁸

Not every intelligible can be demonstrated or known intuitively; at times one can only know things through prophetic revelation and buttress it with “strong arguments,” which I take to be the same as arguments approximating demonstration, which provide near certainty. But, as far as I know, the only proposition that Maimonides proves with arguments approximating demonstration is the aforementioned one about the purposer, i.e., the argument for creation. Maimonides’ willingness to lower the bar, as it were, for rational knowledge, may be directly connected to his desire to include a proposition that is a fundamental of the Law, second only to the belief in Divine unity.⁶⁹

A final thought: Can certain and near-certain knowledge be achieved by more than a tiny elite that includes Moses? After all, in the aforementioned passage, Maimonides appears to raise the bar rather high; he speaks of one who has achieved the demonstration, to the extent that it is possible, of *everything* that may be demonstrated, and who has ascertained in divine matters, to the extent that it is possible, *everything* that may be ascertained, etc. This is a question that I will leave for another time.⁷⁰ But I conclude here by noting that, after making that “bar-raising” statement, he goes on to say, “If, however, you have achieved perfection in the natural things and have understood divine science, you have entered in the ruler’s place *into the inner court* and are with him in one habitation. This is the rank of the men of science; they

theological position consistent with the Law, but rather offers “proofs approximating demonstration” for a Divine Particularizer, reveals the depths of his anti-scepticism.

⁶⁷ *Guide* 2.19, 302.

⁶⁸ An interesting question would be whether, according to Maimonides, the Kalam theologian can be said to know that the world is created. He neither uses a reliable method nor does he understand what creation after non-existence really is. Most likely he has a defective belief in the createdness of the world.

⁶⁹ *Guide* 2.13, 282.

⁷⁰ In the meantime, see Shlomo Pines, “The Limitations of Human Knowledge according to Al-Fārābī, Ibn Bājja, and Maimonides,” in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. I. Twersky (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979): 82–109; Alexander Altmann, “Maimonides on the Intellect and the Scope of Metaphysics,” in A. Altmann, *Von der mittelalterlichen zur modernen Aufklärung—Studien zur jüdischen Geistesgeschichte* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1987), 60–129, and Davidson, *Maimonides the Rationalist*, 173–211, esp. 201–206.

however, are of different grades of perfection.” The “you” to which these words are addressed is Maimonides’ student Joseph, for whom he wrote the *Guide*. It is unlikely that Maimonides thought that Joseph could become a Moses. Rather, “achieving perfection” is, for him, a matter of degree. One need not be a Moses to be with the ruler in one habitation; it is sufficient to be a Joseph, albeit a Joseph who achieves a certain degree of perfection.

Selected Bibliography

- Al-Ghazālī. *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl wa-al-muwaṣṣil ilā Dhī al-ʿal-a wa-al-Jalāl*, ed. Jamīl Ṣalībā, and Kāmil ʿAyyād. Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1967. Translated in Khalidī, Muhammad Ali, ed. *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Altmann, Alexander. *Von der mittelalterlichen zur modernen Aufklärung: Studien zur jüdischen Geistesgeschichte*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1987.
- Avicenna. *The Metaphysics of the Healing*. Translated by Michael Marmura. Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2005.
- Black, Deborah. “Knowledge (Ilm) and Certitude (Yaqīn) in Al-Fārābī’s Epistemology.” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 16 (2006): 11–45.
- Davidson, Herbert A. *Maimonides the Rationalist*. Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2015.
- Davidson, Herbert A. *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Davies, Daniel. *Method and Metaphysics in Maimonides’ Guide for the Perplexed*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Freudenthal, Gad. “‘Instrumentalism’ and ‘Realism’ as Categories in the History of Astronomy: Duhem vs. Popper, Maimonides vs. Gersonides.” *Centaurus* 45 (2003): 227–248.
- Freudenthal, Gad. “Maimonides’ Philosophy of Science. In *Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, edited by Kenneth M. Seeskin, 134–166. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Freudenthal, Gad. “Maimonides on the Knowability of the Heavens and of Their Mover (Guide 2:24).” *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism* 8, no. 1 (2008): 151–57.
- Kraemer, J. “Maimonides and the Spanish Aristotelianism School.” In *Christians, Muslims, and Jews in Medieval and Early Modern Spain: Interaction and Cultural Change*, edited by Mark D. Meyerson and Edward D. English, 40–68. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999.
- Kreisel, Howard T. *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001.
- Kukkonen, Tanelli. “Al-Ghazālī’s Scepticism Revisited.” In *Rethinking the History of Skepticism: The Missing Medieval Background*, edited by Henrik Lagerlund, 29–59. Leiden: Brill, 2010.
- Lagerlund, Henrik. *Rethinking the History of Skepticism: The Missing Medieval Background*. Leiden: Brill, 2010.
- Langermann, Y. Tzvi. “My Truest Perplexities.” *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism* 8 (2008): 301–317.
- Langermann, Y. Tzvi. “The True Perplexity: The *Guide of the Perplexed* Part II, Chapter 24.” In *Perspectives on Maimonides: Philosophical and Historical Studies*, edited by J. L. Kraemer, 159–174. Oxford: Littman Library/Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Maimonides. *Haqdamot ha-Rambam la-Mishnah*. Edited by Isaac Shailat, 53–54 [Heb.] / 450–451 [Arab]. Jerusalem: Maʿaliyot, 1992.

- Manekin, Charles H. "Maimonides and the Arabic Aristotelian Tradition of Epistemology. In *Beyond Religious Borders: Interaction and Intellectual Exchange in the Medieval Islamic World*, edited by David M. Freidenreich and Miriam Goldstein, 78–91, 192–197. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.
- Pines, Shlomo. "The Limitations of Human Knowledge according to Al-Fārābī, Ibn Bājja, and Maimonides." In *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, edited by I. Twersky, 82–109. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979.
- Stern, Josef. *The Matter and Form of Maimonides' "Guide"*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013.

David Lemler

The Sceptical Exegesis of Maimonides and His Followers

Introduction

Maimonides' philosophical exegesis, later developed by Provençal and Spanish Jewish philosophers in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, is characterized by an inner tension following the classical division between the two major rabbinic genres.

These philosophers' general attitude to *halakhah* – the determination of the modalities of application of the biblical laws – might be coined “dogmatic”: it aims at offering a univocal, unambiguous interpretation of a rule as well as the termination of Talmudic debates. On the contrary, a “sceptical” attitude may be observed as regards biblical parables and *aggadot*. The interpretations of the non-legal biblical and rabbinic literature proposed by Maimonidean philosophers seem to question the very notion of a univocal “true meaning” of such texts that could be and ought to be determined.

At the crossroads of dogmatism and scepticism, what conception of the access to knowledge do these exegetical practices illustrate?

Dogmatic and sceptic traits of Maimonides' exegetical theory and practice

Halakhah and *aggadah* are traditionally ruled by different exegetical methods. *Halakhic* exegesis is based in Talmudic and midrashic sources on specific rules of interpretation allegedly received at Sinai, generally referred to as the “13 principles according to which the Torah should be interpreted” (13 *middot she-ha-Torah nidreshet ba-hen*).¹ Aggadic exegesis is a less rigid type of interpretation of Scripture.² Yet the exegetical theory Maimonides developed in his *halakhic* works actually drew up the blueprint for his own practice of philosophical interpretations of biblical parables and *aggadot* as well as the practices of his followers.

1 See the “Beraita of Rabbi Ishmael,” see prologue of the *Sifra*, ed. Isaac H. Weiss (Vienna: Jacob Schlossberg, 1862), 1a-b.

2 On *aggadah*, see the classical study Isaak Heinemann, *Darkhei ha-Aggadah* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1954). For a general presentation of rabbinic exegesis, see Rimon Kasher, “The Interpretation of Scripture in Rabbinic Literature,” in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Martin Jan Mulder (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1988), 547–594.

A “dogmatic” approach to *halakhah*

Maimonides’ approach to *halakhah* might be described as “dogmatic” in two ways. With his famous list of 13 fundamentals (*qawā'id*) in his *Commentary of the Mishnah*, Maimonides is the first within rabbinic Judaism to set a list of compulsory beliefs or “dogmas.” According to his testimony in the later *Treatise on Resurrection*, his decision to set this list came after he realized that expertise in Talmudic studies did not prevent his contemporaries from major speculative mistakes (such as the belief in the corporeality of God). In order to spread fundamental doctrines, it appeared necessary to present this list of beliefs dogmatically, “not using the idiom of inquiry,”³ and to endow them with a normative power, by turning them into *halakhic* norms.⁴

However, Maimonides’ stance on *halakhah* is dogmatic in another respect: his suspicion of doubts and dissensions in matters of law. His approach may be characterized as “fundamentalist” in the strict sense of the term.⁵ Following the path of the Islamic science of the principles of jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*),⁶ he endeavors in his list of fundamental beliefs as well as other *halakhic* writings to determine the roots (*uṣūl*) of the law and to distinguish them from what derives from them. Maimonides makes it clear that his main intention in *halakhah* is to provide a code that would put an end to discussions on juridical details, which he presents as unessential. In an epistle about the *Mishneh Torah* to his beloved student Josef Ibn Shimon, he writes:

The purpose intended in composing the Talmud was lost and has vanished. The purpose of the erudite [today] is to waste time in Talmudic discussions, as if the purpose and intention was solely to exercise polemical skills. This, however, was not the first intention: discussions and polemics occurred only accidentally. [...] The first purpose was the knowledge of what one has to do and of what is forbidden. [...] Therefore I was moved to [recall] the first purpose, to facilitate the task of remembering it, and furthermore: to make it known, for it had been lost among all the polemical words.⁷

³ *Lā 'alā jihat al-istidlāl*. Maimonides, *Treatise on Resurrection* in Itzhak Shailat ed., *Maimonides' Epistles* [Arabic–Hebrew], vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Shailat–Maaleh Adumim, 1995), 320, trans. Abraham S. Halkin and David Hartman, *Epistles of Maimonides: Crisis and Leadership* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), 212–213).

⁴ See Menachem Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought: From Maimonides to Abravanel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), chap 1.

⁵ See Sarah Stroumsa, *Maimonides in His World: Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), chap 3.

⁶ See e.g., Joel L. Kraemer, “The Influence of Islamic Law on Maimonides: The Case of the Five Qualifications” [Hebrew], *Te'udah* 10 (1996): 225–244; Gideon Libson, “Parallels Between Maimonides and Islamic Law,” in *The Thought of Moses Maimonides: Philosophical and Legal Studies*, ed. Ira Robinson, Lawrence Kaplan, and Julien Bauer (New York: Lewiston, 1990), 209–248.

⁷ Shailat ed., *Maimonides' Epistles*, vol. 1, 256, trans. in Stroumsa, *Maimonides in His World*, 63.

In criticizing the focus of Talmudic studies on *halakhic* details, Maimonides is continuing a tradition of Spanish rationalist Jewish thinkers.⁸ But his *Mishneh Torah* stands out by its ambition. In his introduction, Maimonides suggests that, as regards the determination of *halakhah*, the *Mishneh Torah* aims quite simply at replacing the Talmud.⁹ *Halakhah* is presented there in a categorical way, with no mention of the original Talmudic discussion,¹⁰ a feature which later aroused fierce opposition.

Dissension as a criterion of classification in *halakhah*

This dogmatic suspicion about doubts and dissensions is also reflected in Maimonides' classification of *halakhah*. Among all the laws mentioned in the vast Talmudic and midrashic literature, a criterion for departing principles – that is the laws received by Moses in Sinai, categorized as biblical (*de-'oraita*) – from the later rulings categorized as rabbinic (*de-rabbanan*), is the presence of a consensus (*ijmā'*) or of a dissension (*ikhtilāf*).

In the introduction of the *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Maimonides differentiates several categories of laws: the first being laws received from Moses and derived from Scripture by means of the 13 *middot*, the second are laws received from Moses without any scriptural proof (*halakhah le-Mosheh mi-Sinai*), the third are laws derived from Scripture by later prophets or sages by means of the 13 *middot*, and the fourth purely rabbinic institutions not derived from Scripture. Among the third group, laws derived from Scripture by later prophets or sages by means of the 13 *middot*, some give rise to dissensions in the rabbinic sources and some do not. Therefore, all laws directly received from Moses are undisputed, but not all undisputed laws are directly received from Moses. Conversely, all disputed laws are rabbinic, but not all rabbinic laws are disputed. In any event, the presence of a dissension is a sure sign to identify a law as rabbinic. A debate only occurs as regards the “branches” (*furū'*) derived from the undisputed “roots” (*uṣūl*).

⁸ See Isadore Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides (Mishneh Torah)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 195–215, quoting Bahya Ibn Paquda, Judah ha-Levy, Abraham Ibn Ezra and Abraham Ibn Daud.

⁹ Moshe Halbertal, *Maimonides: Life and Thought* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), 167–196 discusses two possible views on the nature of the *Mishneh Torah* for Maimonides: a representation of *halakhah* or *halakhah* itself, but seems to lean in favour of the latter.

¹⁰ Maimonides justifies this omission by the need of concision and efficacy: “I decided to compile [all the previous *halakhic* literature] [...] omitting objections, counter-objections and controversies.” Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah* suppress the, (Jerusalem–Bnei Brak: Shabtai Fraenkel, 1995), Introduction, in fine, 4; “[In the *Mishneh Torah*], it appeared to me appropriate to elude the Scriptural proofs and reasonings and the mention of the [name] of the holders of the [diverse] views.” Maimonides, *Sefer ha-Mitsvot. Maqor ve-Targum*, [Arabic text and Hebrew], ed. Yosef Kafih (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1971), Introduction, 1.

Maimonides' sceptical exegetical method in *halakhah*

The source of disagreement appears to relate to exegesis: a divergence about the application of the 13 *middot*, hermeneutic principles referred to as “dialectical (*jadali*) tools of reasoning.”¹¹ This term is a technical term within Arabic Aristotelian logic in the classification of syllogisms and qualifies undemonstrative reasonings based on admitted premises, aimed at convincing an opponent.¹² This qualification clearly indicates that the *middot* are used in a potentially polemical context and that the law resulting from their application does not have the indisputable value of a demonstrative truth.¹³ Therefore, most of the questions involved in *halakhah* are intrinsically disputable.¹⁴

Through a thorough analysis of the introduction of the *Commentary on the Mishnah* and that of the *Book of Commandments* in light of their sources in Sunni *uṣūl al-fiqh*, Mordechai Cohen has identified three types of exegesis attributed by Maimonides to the Rabbis in the field of *halakhah*.¹⁵

We just mentioned the first: an expansion of *halakhah* mainly through the application of the 13 *middot*, identified with the *qiyās* (analogical reasoning) of the Islamic law. Such exegeses produce, on the basis of the biblical verses, the rules of rabbinic authority. They constitute “creative interpretations” (*midrash yotser*).¹⁶

11 Kafiḥ, ed., *Mishnah 'im Perush ha-Rambam. Maqor we-Targum*, [Arabic text and Hebrew], vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1963), 4. See Aviram Ravitsky, *Logic and Talmudic Methodology: The Application of Aristotelian Logic in the Interpretation of The Thirteen Hermeneutical Principles* [Hebrew], (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2009). On the opinion that juridical reasonings are dialectical in Islamic law, see Wael B. Hallaq, *A History of Islamic Legal Theories: An Introduction to Sunnī Uṣūl al-Fiqh* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 94.

12 See Maimonides, *Treatise on the Art of Logic*, 8; cf. Al-Fārābī, *Enumeration of the Sciences*, chap 2, §5; *Iḥṣā' al-'Ulūm*, ed. Osman Amin (Cairo: al-Khanjī, 1931), 21–23. Maimonides' authorship of the *Treatise* was recently contested by Herbert Davidson, *Moses Maimonides. The Man and His Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 313–322, but Davidson's arguments were criticised by Ahmad Hasnawi, “Réflexions sur la terminologie logique de Maïmonide et son contexte Farabien: le *Guide des Perplexes* et le *Traité de Logique*,” in *Maïmonide: philosophe et savant (1138–1204)*, ed. Tony Lévy and Rushdi Rashed (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 69–73.

13 See Mordechai Z. Cohen, “Talmudist's Halakhic Hermeneutics: A New Understanding of Maimonides' Principle of *Peshat* Primacy,” *Jewish Studies, an Internet Journal* 10 (2012): 293–294; Mordechai Z. Cohen, *Opening the Gates of Interpretation: Maimonides' Biblical Hermeneutics in Light of His Geonic-Andalusian Heritage and Muslim Milieu* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 268.

14 This is consistent with the categorization of “good” and “bad” as admitted opinions (*mashhūrāt*) as opposed to “true” and “false” in *Guide of the Perplexed* 1:2.

15 Cohen, “Talmudist's Halakhic Hermeneutics,” 257–359.

16 Menachem Elon, *Jewish Law: History, Sources, Principles*, vol. 1, 4 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1994), 285.

The next two types of exegesis are related to rules of biblical authority. According to Maimonides, these rules were all transmitted to Moses in Sinai and later transmitted from generation to generation. As we have seen, some of the biblical laws are derived from Scripture by means of the 13 *middot* but are to be counted among the 613 commandments only because they were received by tradition (*bil-naql*) and not because they were deduced exegetically from the verses (*bil-qiyās*).¹⁷ If the Sages sometimes provide interpretations of verses to sustain a biblical commandment, it is only because “it is a wisdom of the revealed word (*ḥikmat al-naṣṣ*), that the [transmitted] interpretations (*tafāsīr*) can [also] be extrapolated from it by means of syllogisms (*qiyāsāt*), proof-texts (*isnādāt*), allusions (*talwīḥāt*), and indications (*ishārāt*) that occur in the text.”¹⁸

On some occasions though, the Sages quote a verse only as a “support (*isnād*),” as “a kind of sign (*siman*), in order to remember [the rule].”¹⁹ In such cases, exemplified by *loci* where the Talmud explicitly states that the verse is a “simple support” (*asmakhta be-ʿalma*),²⁰ the use of the verse by the Sages does not reflect – says Maimonides – the “intention of the verse” (*gharaḍ al-naṣṣ*).²¹

This remark suggests an “intentionalist approach”²² to exegesis: an interpretation is deemed “true” or “valid”²³ if it reflects the intention or at least proposes an interpretation that coheres with the intention of the lawgiver. However, this intentionalist approach carries what might be called a “sceptical” view of exegesis, as the only instance in which the proposed interpretation of a verse, by way of the different rabbinic exegetical methods, is certain and undebated is when the true interpretation of the verse is actually *already known* by tradition. The exegesis consequently never discloses this intention. The “wisdom of the text” (*ḥikmat al-naṣṣ*) denotes the fact

17 Maimonides, *Sefer ha-Mitswot*, ed. Kafih, Introduction, 2nd principle, 15.

18 Kafih, ed., *Mishnah 'im Perush ha-Rambam*, vol. 1, 4, trans. in Cohen, “Talmudist’s Halakhic Hermeneutics,” 296.

19 Kafih, ed., *Mishnah 'im Perush ha-Rambam*, vol. 1, 17.

20 On *asmakhta* as a mode of reference to the verses in the Talmud, see David Weiss Halivni, *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), Appendix 1, 155–157.

21 Kafih, ed., *Mishnah 'im Perush ha-Rambam*, vol. 1, 17.

22 Mordechai Z. Cohen, *Three Approaches to Biblical Metaphor: From Abraham Ibn Ezra and Maimonides to David Kimhi* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 324–6, shows this approach was well-spread among the Andalousian Jewish thinkers.

23 In the introduction to the *Sefer ha-Mitswot*, Maimonides insists that he does not question the truthfulness of the *middot*: “And lest you think that we refrain from counting them because they are not certain (*mutayaqqina*), and that the law derived from such a *middah* may be true (*ṣāḥiḥ*) or may be untrue, that is not the reason” (ed. Kafih, 15, trans. in Cohen, “Talmudist’s Halakhic Hermeneutics,” 314). As Moshe Halbertal puts it, Maimonides’ holds in *halakhah* a “coherence theory of truth.” Given the dialectical nature of the *middot*, their truth is determined according to the “degree of consistency of the new norm with the norms given earlier.” (Halbertal, *Maimonides*, chapter 2, especially 106). This degree is measured through the capacity of a norm to convince a majority of authorized rulers.

that the intention of the verse, which we know by tradition in cases of biblical obligations, may *also* be found by way of human exegetical procedures.²⁴

In the case of the “creative interpretation” of the Sages expanding the initial scope of the intention of the verse, the exegesis is, by its own nature, open to controversy and is a kind of dialectical reasoning. Lastly, in the case of *asmakhta* (simple support), exegesis explicitly renounces revealing the intention of the verse. As we will see, in the field of *aggadah*, Maimonides also rejects rabbinic “*derash*” as reflecting the verses’ true intention.²⁵

Nevertheless, as noted by M. Cohen, if Maimonides refers to *asmakhta* or *derash* in derogatory terms, he uses the very same term *isnād*, “support,” to refer to both *asmakhtot* and occasionally to more “convincing” types of exegesis. Rather than reflecting an inconsistency of Maimonides in his use of this term, sometimes used pejoratively and sometimes not,²⁶ this suggests that *isnād* denotes an essential feature of rabbinic exegeses in Maimonides’ approach to *halakhah*.

According to Maimonides, rabbinic hermeneutics is never able by its own resources to reach a verse’s true intention. Rather, the Sages use verses to ground a knowledge they have or a practice they want to promote. Either they propose retrospectively an exegetical reasoning which finds in the verses the meaning they already know by tradition, or they seek in a verse indications to deal with a situation that was not addressed initially by the Scriptures, or finally they ground their views on a verse whose meaning they know to be different.²⁷ This role of biblical reference as a support for the thought will have a long-lasting destiny in the later Jewish philosophical tradition.

Maimonides’ fundamentalist endeavour, meant to emphasize the most important elements in *halakhah*, was also ultimately heading towards turning the intellectual as well as exegetical attention away from *halakhah*. But the sceptical exegetical theory

²⁴ This echoes the repeated use of the term *ḥikma* (or the Hebrew *ḥokhmah*) in Maimonides’ discussion of the rationale of the commandments in *Guide* 3. The human beings can acknowledge God’s wisdom in the law precisely because they are able to identify a reason to most of its dispositions. Maimonides’ expression “wisdom of His laws,” (*ḥikmat aḥkāmīhi*, *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:49, Salomon Munk and Issachar Joel, eds. (Jerusalem: Azrieli, 1931), 444) is reminiscent of the *hikmat al-naṣṣ*. See also *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:31, ed. Munk-Joel, 383.

²⁵ See below, my discussion on a passage of *Guide* 3:43 and, on Maimonides’ critical view on rabbinic hermeneutics in both *aggadah* and *halakhah*, Herbert Davidson, *Moses Maimonides. The Man and His Works* (NYC: Oxford University Press, 2005), 128–135.

²⁶ See Cohen, “Talmudist’s Halakhic Hermeneutics,” 296, n. 152.

²⁷ Cohen, “Talmudist’s Halakhic Hermeneutics,” 274–284 inscribes Maimonides’ position in a history of theories of rabbinic exegesis going back to Saadia Gaon, who characterised all halakhic *midrashim* as an *a posteriori* means to link *halakhah* to Scripture and not as a way to deduce it from Scripture (see Moshe Zucker, “Fragments of the *Kitāb Taḥṣīl Al-Sharā’i’ Al-Samā’iyah*” [Arabic text and Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 41 (1972): 378). Echoes of this view are found later in the works of different authors in the Andalusian tradition such as Abraham Ibn Ezra (egg. short commentary on Ex 21:8) and Juda Halevy (see esp. *Kuzari* III:73). Maimonides’ position is however original in this tradition, since he acknowledges a generative power to the *midrash* in matters of rabbinic authority.

developed with regard to *halakhah* eventually influenced his own and his followers' approaches to non-*halakhic* materials.

Maimonides on the exegesis of parables

In the introduction of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides explains having abandoned a previous project of writing two exegetical books: one on the prophetic parables (*Book of Prophecy*, *Kitāb al-Nubū'a*) and one on "all the difficult passages in the *Midrashim* where the external sense manifestly contradicts the truth and departs from the intelligible"²⁸ (*Book of Correspondence*, *Kitāb al-Muṭābaqa*). This project came to appear to him as contradictory, since it would have ruined the intention the prophets and the sages had in concealing these profound matters.²⁹

He nevertheless ascribes as one of the main purposes of the *Guide* the explanation of some obscure prophetic texts, developing a whole theory of the hermeneutics of prophetic parables, which he based on the originally Islamic distinction between the apparent (*ẓāhir*) and inner (*bāṭin*) meanings of the verses. In the case of "well-constructed" (*muḥkam*) parables, the inner meaning is related to philosophical truths ("wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is"), while the apparent meaning is attributed a utility in regard to moral and political welfare.³⁰ The type of interpretation involved is referred to as *ta'wīl*, a process of "going back" from the apparent to the inner meaning. In a Maimonidean philosophical context, the exegesis of prophetic parables might be called allegorical: the verses actually convey something else than what they say explicitly. The philosopher's hermeneutic path consists in deciphering the prophetic images as a transposition of conceptual elements.

In the body of the *Guide*, Maimonides occasionally applies this method to some prophetic parables, most notably to the two major secrets of the Torah he identifies in his introduction: *Ma'aseh Bere'shit* (the Account of the Beginning, in *Guide* 2:30)³¹ and *Ma'aseh Merkavah* (the Account of the Divine Chariot, in *Guide* 3:1–7).³² In the field of *halakhah*, Maimonides' hermeneutics aims at offering a unique interpretation and to

²⁸ Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 9.

²⁹ *Guide*, Introduction, trans. Pines, 9–10.

³⁰ *Guide*, Introduction, trans. Pines, 9–10.

³¹ See Sara Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides' Interpretation of the Story of Creation* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 1978). See also, Aviezer Ravitzky, "Aristotle's Meteorology and the Maimonidean Modes of Interpreting the Account of Creation" [Hebrew], *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 9 (1990): 225–250.

³² In recent scholarship, see Gad Freudenthal, "Maimonides on the Scope of Metaphysics *Alias* Ma'aseh Merkavah: The Evolution of His Views," in *Maimonides Y Su época*, ed. Carlos del Valle (Madrid: Sociedad Estatal de Commemoraciones Culturales, 2007), 221–230 and Howard Kreisel, "From Esotericism to Science: The Account of the Chariot in Maimonidean Philosophy Till the End of the Thirteenth

put an end to any further discussion. In the case of parables, however, Maimonides cultivates the possibility of competing interpretations of the same text. In reference to Maimonides' indications in the introduction of the *Guide*, these plural interpretations were often understood as deliberate contradictions, engaging the reader to identify which interpretation reflects Maimonides' true view.³³ I propose rather, in view of his exegetical theory, to envisage them as reflecting the fact that Maimonides simply did not think these parables could be assigned a single sound meaning. Since the ancient tradition of Israel as regards the secrets of the Torah was lost because of the conditions of the exile (as explained in *Guide* 1:71), it has become impossible to identify the original intention of the prophetic parables.

It is striking that, with respect to *Ma'aseh Bere'shit*, Maimonides famously states that the "the gates of figurative interpretation (*ta'wil*) [are not] shut in our faces."³⁴ Moreover, in his interpretation of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, Maimonides expresses on two occasions this possibility of a polysemy of prophetic texts, suggesting that the most profound secrets of the Torah cannot be reduced to a single *bāṭin*.

In the introduction of the third part of the *Guide*, he explains his reasons for disclosing his own interpretation of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, while the Mishnah forbids even an oral teaching of the subject to more than one exceptional student (*mḥagigah* II, 1). He adduces the lack of a tradition regarding the meaning of the text of Ezekiel 1 and the fact that he himself arrived at an indubitable understanding of the passage. This led him to the decision to write down his interpretation for fear of this clear understanding of the text getting lost with his death. A sentence, though, suggests this interpretation might not correspond to the true prophetic intention:

In that which has occurred to me with regard to these matters [*Ma'aseh Merkavah*], I followed conjecture and supposition; no divine revelation has come to me to teach me that the intention in the matter in question was such and such, nor did I receive what I believe in these matters from a teacher. But the texts of the prophetic books and the dicta of the Sages, together with the speculative premises that I possess, showed me that things are indubitably (*bi-lā shakk*) so and so. *Yet it is possible that they are different and that something else is intended (maqṣūd)*.³⁵

Since we are in the context of an apology for trespassing a major rabbinic proscription, it might be argued that the last sentence is only some sort of concession in order to nuance the previous statements and to make them more acceptable to the common

Century," in *The Cultures of Maimonideanism: New Approaches to the History of Jewish Thought*, ed. James T. Robinson (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 21–56.

³³ See, for example, James A. Diamond, *Maimonides and the Hermeneutics of Concealment: Deciphering Scripture and Midrash in the Guide of the Perplexed* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), Introduction, which sets the rules of such an esoteric apprehension of Maimonides' reading of *midrash* and Scripture, in a Straussian perspective.

³⁴ *Guide* 2:25, trans. Pines, 327.

³⁵ *Guide* 3: Introduction, trans. Pines, 416 (the stresses are mine). Arabic text: ed. Munk-Joel, 298.

reader. This hypothesis might be supported by the apparent contradiction between this sentence and the very strong term *indubitably* used just before.

Yet, the plain meaning of the sentence implies the acknowledgment of a true possibility that the text might have an alternative signification. A tension is set between *certainty*, the subjective affect of truth characterized by the absence of doubt, and the *intention* (*maqṣūd*) of the text. Just as what we observed in the field of *halakhah*, Maimonides' intentionalist approach, identifying the true or authentic meaning of a text with the intention of its author, collides with a sceptical stance denying the possibility to ascertain having accessed this very intention. Yet, although Maimonides confesses his comprehension of the text may differ from its actual intention, this comprehension satisfies him *subjectively* in his quest for the inner meaning of Ezekiel's vision.

This idea of an intrinsic equivocality of *Ma'aseh Merkhavah* is repeated later in *Guide* 3:4 (*in fine*). There, Maimonides recalls Jonathan ben Uziel's understanding of the term "*ofanim*" (wheels) in Ez 1:16, which contradicts his own. In his own cryptic way, Maimonides seems to suggest that the "*ofanim*" should be identified with the four sublunary elements,³⁶ whereas in the authoritative Aramaic translator's interpretation they refer to the celestial spheres. Maimonides writes:

You must not find it incongruous that, having mentioned the interpretation of Jonathan ben Uziel, peace be on him, I propounded a different interpretation. You will find that many among the Sages, and even among the commentators, differ from his interpretation with regard to certain words and many notions that are set forth by the prophets. How could this not be with regard to these obscure matters? Moreover *I do not oblige you to decide in favour of my interpretation*. Understand the whole of his interpretation from that to which I have drawn your attention, and understand my interpretation. *God knows in which of the two interpretations there is a correspondence to what has been intended (mā urīda).*³⁷

Again, some room is given here to an esoteric interpretation of Maimonides' words. His insistence on the fact that Jonathan ben Uziel's reading contradicts his own *indubitable* understanding, added to the mention of the many Sages who differed from the translator's view, might be seen as a veiled criticism of Jonathan's authority. In this perspective, the last sentence is to be seen as a means to feign restoring this authority. Asserting Jonathan's view might actually correspond to the prophetic intention is Maimonides' anticipated retort to those who would reproach his boldness in criticizing Jonathan. It is conversely what makes the very public expression of this criticism possible.

However, taken on its own account, Maimonides' statement actually not only debases Jonathan's prestige, but also changes Maimonides' own interpretation into one possible reading among others. Since the knowledge of the true prophetic intention is reserved ultimately for God only, Josef Stern concludes Maimonides was actually suggesting that the metaphysical subjects implied by Ezekiel's text are beyond

³⁶ See Freudenthal, "Maimonides on the Scope of Metaphysics *Alias* Ma'aseh Merkavah," 228.

³⁷ *Guide* 3:4, trans. Pines, 424–425 (the emphases are mine), Ar. ed. Munk-Joel, 305.

human comprehension and that one ought not to commit to either of the two interpretations.³⁸ However, rather than appealing for a suspension of judgment, what Maimonides does explicitly is invite his reader to scrutinize each interpretation in order to choose the one which convinces him the most. In other terms, the possibility to access a *subjective* exegetical satisfaction is opposed to the impossibility to access the *objective* “real” meaning of the text, which only God knows.

Throughout the history of its reception, Maimonides’ exegetical path in the interpretation of the biblical parables was recurrently harshly criticized. The opponents to philosophy during the Maimonidean controversy of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries already rejected allegorical interpretation because it seemed to question the truthfulness of the biblical text by suggesting it means something else than what it says.³⁹ Spinoza famously attacked Maimonides’ exegetical method in order to show the heterogeneity of philosophy and religion. Maimonides, instead of reading the texts, forces them to express the ideas he wants to read in them.⁴⁰ In modern scholarship, Moses Segal dispraises Maimonidean biblical exegesis as an artificial “philosophical *derash*” that lacks interest in the actual meaning the verses.⁴¹

In his masterful study on Maimonides’ biblical hermeneutics (both *halakhic* and non-*halakhic*), Mordechai Cohen showed how Maimonides’ practice of non-literal interpretation (*ta’wil*) was actually consistent with an original theory of the literal meaning of the biblical text, indebted with the Andalusian exegetical school of *peshat*. Nevertheless, even though Maimonides appears to be much more interested than traditionally admitted in all the nuances of the biblical text, Cohen shows Maimonidean *ta’wil* to be necessarily subjective.⁴² The criticism of allegorical interpretation is therefore right in observing that Maimonides’ exegesis of the parables does not provide an interpretation of the true meaning of the texts, since it actually even abandons this purpose. What are the philosophical implications of such a subjective exegetical path? A survey of the methods of interpretation of biblical parables and rabbinic *aggadot* found among Maimonides’ epigones will help answering this question.⁴³

³⁸ Josef Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides’ Guide* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 299–300. In this case, the metaphysical issue at stake is the causal role of the separate intellects.

³⁹ This is notably reflected in Juda Alfakhar’s letters to David Kimhi in the 1230s, *Qoveš Teshuvot ha-Rambam* [Hebrew], ed. A. Lichtenberg (Leipzig, Schnauss, 1859), III, 1a, or the text of the 1305 ban on philosophy by R. Salomon b. Aderet, *Teshuvot ha-Rashba* [Hebrew], ed. H. Z. Dimitrowsky (Jerusalem: Mekhon Tiferet Israel, 1990), 727–728.

⁴⁰ Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, 7, §21, trans. R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1951), 114–118.

⁴¹ Moses S. Segal, *Biblical Exegesis* [Hebrew], (Jerusalem: Keriat Sefer, 1971), 51–52.

⁴² Cohen, *Opening the Gates of Interpretation*, 465 quoting a passage of the *Treatise on Resurrection*, ed. Shailat, 330.

⁴³ For an interpretation of Maimonides’ conception of parables, insisting on their epistemological role, see Yair Lorberbaum, “Maimonides on Philosophical Parables” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 71, no. 1–2

Post-Maimonidean approaches to parables and *aggadot*

Maimonides on *aggadot*

Although he praises the philosophical value of *aggadah* in a long passage of the introduction of the *Commentary on the Mishnah*,⁴⁴ Maimonides did not produce many actual interpretations of rabbinic *aggadot*. He only set out the blueprint for a later developed genre of philosophical interpretations of *aggadot* among post-Maimonidean philosophers, especially those in Provence in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

In the introduction of the *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Maimonides exhorts his reader “not to think that the value [of “*derashah*”, i.e. *aggadah*] is low and that it is of no interest, since it contains extraordinary riddles and profound matters.”⁴⁵ Many *aggadot* appear absurd and naive on first sight, especially because they are filled with anthropomorphisms; they actually disclose truths of an unrivalled depth that the rabbis did not want to express explicitly for fear of the lack of understanding of the common man.⁴⁶ *Aggadah* is presented as a rabbinic esoteric art of writing meant to be deciphered only by the intellectual elite. With such a positive view on *aggadah*, Maimonides broke with the discomforted, if not dismissive, attitude towards *aggadah* of most *Geonim*.⁴⁷ The major importance *aggadot* had for Maimonides’ own son Abraham as a tool to circulate esoteric knowledge might derive directly from his father’s positive stance toward this genre.⁴⁸

By definition, Maimonides’ *halakhic* works do not involve much detailed interpretations of *aggadot*.⁴⁹ Unexpectedly though, even the *Guide* appears to be much more circumspect about the value of *aggadah* than the *Commentary on the Mishnah*. In *Guide* 3:43, Maimonides defines certain kinds of *midrashic* interpretations as mere “poetic conceits.”⁵⁰ This led Yair Lorberbaum to the radical hypothesis that Maimonides actually totally changed his view on the value of *aggadot* going

(2002): 87–132 and, in previous scholarship, Isaak Heinemann, “Die Wissenschaftliche Allegoristik Des Jüdischen Mittelalters,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 23, no. 1 (1951): 611–643, and Frank Talmage, “Apples of Gold: The Inner Meaning of Sacred Texts in Medieval Judaism,” in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible through the Middle Ages*, ed. Arthur Green (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 313–353.

⁴⁴ Kafih, ed., *Mishnah ‘im Perush ha-Rambam*, vol. 1, 35–45.

⁴⁵ Kafih, ed., *Mishnah ‘im Perush ha-Rambam*, vol. 1, 35.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ See Marc Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis: A Thirteenth-Century Commentary on the Aggadah* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 8–13, quoting especially Samuel b. Hofni, Sherira Gaon and Hai Gaon.

⁴⁸ See below n. 64.

⁴⁹ See Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides*, 150–153.

⁵⁰ *Guide* 3:43, trans. Pines, 572–573.

back, in the *Guide*, to an attitude akin to the classical *Geonic* approach.⁵¹ However, according to our hypothesis, stating that the rabbis did not aim at discovering a verse's "true meaning" is not necessarily derogatory. In the precise context of a chapter on the rationale for the commandments, Maimonides simply contrasts his assessment of the intrinsic logic of the biblical law based on a literal reading of the juridic verses⁵² with the rabbis' method, which is freely rereading the verse in order to propose a moral teaching.

Philosophy and exegesis in the thirteenth century

While it is not clear whether Maimonides considered his allegorical hermeneutics of the prophetic parables as also valid for rabbinic *aggadot*, his followers in the next two centuries clearly did.

The diffusion of Samuel Ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation the *Guide* opened a new period in the history of medieval Jewish philosophy. Post-Maimonidean philosophers had to face a fierce opposition to philosophy among the conservative fringes of the Jewish communities in Latin Europe (notably Provence, Northern Spain, and Italy), which had no previous knowledge of the philosophical sciences. The result is that the thirteenth century was marked by a philosophical production oriented towards a diffusion of philosophical knowledge in these regions through the compilation of philosophical and scientific anthologies and encyclopaedias as well as through the translations of major philosophical works into Hebrew. This didactical enterprise was accompanied by an important exegetical activity among the philosophers both of biblical and rabbinic texts.

This activity may be understood as an instrumental extra-philosophical tool in the general endeavour of diffusing philosophical knowledge. Leo Strauss famously denied the *Guide*'s very philosophical nature because its explicit aims are to explain biblical terms and passages.⁵³ This denial is based on Strauss' general assumption that exegesis has nothing to do with Maimonides' own definition of philosophy, which he identified with Aristotle's teaching and method, and that therefore he was

51 Yair Lorberbaum, "Changes in Maimonides' Approach to Aggadah" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 79, no. 1 (2008): 81–122; Yair Lorberbaum, "Incline Thy Ear, and Hear the Words, and Apply Thy Heart unto My Knowledge; Criticism Aggadah in The Guide of the Perplexed" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 79, no. 2 (2009): 203–230.

52 According to Cohen, Maimonides' exegetical method as regards the rationale for the commandments rests on *zāhir al-naṣṣ* (the apparent meaning of the biblical text), rather than *peshateh di-qera* (the biblical text itself, including its received interpretation). Cohen, *Opening the Gates of Interpretation*, chapter 3.

53 Leo Strauss, "The Literary Character of the Guide of the Perplexed," in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 46.

not engaged in philosophy when interpreting biblical texts.⁵⁴ In this perspective, biblical and rabbinic exegesis is only an effective means to spread philosophical ideas because it is a popular genre of writing that presents foreign thoughts in a familiar way; it justifies the study of philosophy as such by showing its harmony with religious sources.⁵⁵

This view, however, meets a number of difficulties. David Kimhi's biblical commentaries (c.1160–c.1235, Provence), which were filled with popularized elements of the Maimonidean philosophy, fits well in this model. Jacob Anatoli (1194–1256), Samuel Ibn Tibbon's son-in-law, also used the genre of sermons in order to give a wide audience access to philosophical doctrines, even though it occasioned him some harsh times in Southern France and Sicily. Other philosophers used exegetical forms to express heterodox views. This is the case of Samuel Ibn Tibbon himself, with his *Ma'amar Yiqqawu ha-Mayim*, a philosophical treatise consisting of a series of commentaries of biblical passages, replete with ideas departing from the religious doxa on issues such as the creation of the world or providence.⁵⁶ Although his philosophical anthologies and encyclopaedias are all extant, the exegetical work of Shem Tov Falaquera (c.1225–c.1295, Northern Spain), *Sefer ha-Derash* (*Book of Interpretation*), was lost, reflecting a limited diffusion, and the few passages we know from quotations reveal a highly heterodox text.⁵⁷

Another argument supporting the idea that exegesis was actually viewed by the philosophers an integral part of their philosophical activity is the quantitative importance of the exegetical texts among the productions of thirteenth-century Jewish philosophers. Beside the known commentaries, Marc Saperstein hypothesized the existence of a widespread genre of commentaries on the rabbinic *aggadot* in thirteenth-century Provence.⁵⁸ This production of philosophical interpretations is an interesting feature when compared with Maimonides' cautiousness in the *Guide* and the position on philosophical exegesis of the second most influential thinker for

54 Strauss, "The Literary Character of the Guide of the Perplexed," 42. For an esoteric interpretation of this statement, see Warren Z. Harvey, "Why Maimonides Was Not a Mutakallim," in *Perspectives on Maimonides: Philosophical and Historical Studies*, ed. Joel L. Kraemer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 105–114. See also, Josef Stern, "Philosophy or Exegesis: Some Critical Comments," in *Judaeano-Arabic Studies: Proceedings of the Founding Conference of the Society for Judaeano-Arabic Studies*, ed. Norman Golb (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997), 213–228.

55 See James T. Robinson, ed., *Samuel Ibn Tibbon's Commentary on Ecclesiastes: The Book of the Soul of Man* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 14.

56 Rebecca Kneller-Rowe, "Samuel Ibn Tibbon's *Ma'amar Yiqqawu ha-Mayim* a Philosophical and Exegetical Treatise," (PhD diss., Tel Aviv University, 2011). For an attempt to reconstruct his esoteric view on creation, see Gad Freudenthal, "Samuel Ibn Tibbon's Avicennian Theory of an Eternal World," *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism* 8, no. 1 (2008): 41–129.

57 Raphael Jospe and Dov Schwartz, "Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera's Lost Bible Commentary," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 64 (1993): 167–200.

58 Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis*.

these authors. In the *Decisive Treatise*, Averroes both prescribes the Muslims who are apt to the philosophical sciences to interpret the Koran in such a way that it harmonizes with philosophy *and* forbids them to disclose their exegeses to non-philosophers,⁵⁹ which is precisely what post-Maimonidean philosophers seem to do. This might reflect the fact that they considered exegesis as a necessary detour in order to express their philosophical ideas, rather than as a concession to the contemporary religious mindset.

***Aggadah* as a new field of philosophical investigation**

These authors' perception of Maimonides' exegetical endeavour seems to have been the following: with *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides actually did definitely close the *halakhic* debates and allowed intellectual efforts to focus on the understanding of the important matters pertaining to physics and metaphysics at the heart of the *aggadic* genre.⁶⁰ For example, referring to *Mishneh Torah*, Falaquera wrote around 1290, probably in Spain, that Maimonides: "[...] opened a path in the fierce waters of the Talmud, set peace among the students and calmed down their quarrels and disputes. He indicated the practical law so that it is not necessary to go back over objections and counter-objections."⁶¹

In Provence, Levi ben Abraham (c.1225–c.1315) expressed not only a violent criticism of a certain way of studying the Talmud (focusing on *halakhic* details), but also of the Babylonian Talmud itself. Its dialectical mode of expression (*pilpul*) is envisaged as a sign of its corrupted, exilic nature, which diverts the Jews' attention from the essential matters. "The lack of science (*hokhmah*) among the Jews results from [...] the length of the Babylonian Talmud which oppresses our minds (*ha-matrid libbenu*)."⁶² Hence the necessity of Maimonides' codification of *halakhah*. In the Islamic world, a similar idea is found in the writings of a friendly disciple of Abraham the son of Maimonides.⁶³

Contrary to this negative view on the study of *halakhah*, post-Maimonidean authors widely endorsed the positive view on *aggadah* found in the introduction of

⁵⁹ Averroes, *Decisive Treatise & Epistle Dedicatory*, ed. Georges Hourani, trans. Charles Edwin Butterworth (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2001), §45, 27.

⁶⁰ On post-Maimonidean critical attitude towards *halakhic* and Talmudic studies, see Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 100–119.

⁶¹ David Lemler, "Shem Tov Falaquera's Letter Regarding the Guide – Critical Edition," *Zutot: Perspectives on Jewish Culture* 9, no. 1 (2012): 46–47. See also his derogatory statements about *halakhic* studies in *Sefer ha-Mevaqqesh* (Amsterdam: Leib Zismans, 1777), 72.

⁶² Levi ben Abraham ben Hayyim, *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and The Gate of the Haggadah* [Hebrew], ed. Howard Kreisel (Jerusalem: Ben Gurion University Press, 2014), 234.

⁶³ Abraham S. Halkin, "In Defense of Maimonides' Code" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 25, no. 4 (1956): 413–428.

the *Commentary on the Mishnah* and took over the abandoned project of the *Book of Correspondence*, mentioned in the introduction of the *Guide*. Abraham the son of Maimonides wrote an extensive introduction to the study of *aggadah*,⁶⁴ distinguishing between unserious *aggadot* written to maintain the students' attention and serious ones, whose inner profound meaning needs to be disclosed only to the select few. In Latin Europe, Moses Ibn Tibbon (fl.1244–1283, Provence), Samuel's son, is the first known author who systematically dealt with the philosophical interpretation of *aggadah*. The same type of classification as that of Abraham Maimuni is found in his writings,⁶⁵ the difference being their general intellectual frame of reference, a Jewish form of Sufism for Abraham, Averroist Aristotelianism for Moses.

The philosophical role of *aggadic* exegesis: the appropriation of Aristotelian science

What was the role of exegesis in the intellectual enterprise of our authors, if it does not come down to be a mere didactic or apologetic tool?

After all, the exegesis of biblical and rabbinic texts is indeed an extra-philosophical activity since it does not contribute in any way to the increase of philosophical knowledge. The principal objection raised against allegorical philosophical exegesis seems to stand: it appears as an artificial attempt to *read in* the Bible and rabbinic texts statements deriving from the Greek and Arabic philosophical sciences. Therefore, the following conclusions could be drawn: (1) the exegetical path of medieval Jewish philosophers in the Maimonidean tradition actually implied a “veiled criticism” of the biblical and rabbinic lore (to take over Gershom Scholem's expression)⁶⁶ by suggesting that it does not provide any knowledge beside what could be apprehended by human intellectual faculties; (2) these authors did not have any real interest in the actual meaning of the texts on which they commented, since they artificially forced them to express their own ideas, according to the Spinozian criticism.

These two criticisms fail to perceive that actually the philosophical interest these authors found in exegesis lies in their exegetical practice rather than in any results of that practice. A typical example of a philosophical-exegetical treatise of the post-Maimonidean period reflects the epistemological function of the practice of exegesis. Levi ben Avraham's *Livyat Hen*, completed in 1296, is a massive treatise that cost its author

⁶⁴ Translated from Arabic and printed under the title *Ma'amar 'al odot derashot Hazal* at the beginning of the editions of the *Ein Ya'aqov*.

⁶⁵ *Sefer Pe'ah*, in *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon* [Hebrew], eds. Colette Sirat and Howard Kreisel (Beer-Sheva: Ben Gurion University Press, 2010), 89–90. On Moses' approach to *aggadot*, see Colette Sirat, “Les déraisons des Aggadot du Talmud et leur explication rationnelle: le *Sefer Péa* et la *Rhétorique* d'Aristote,” *Bulletin de Philosophie Médiévale* 47 (2005): 69–86.

⁶⁶ Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 27.

constant harassment from his contemporaries in Provence.⁶⁷ He was at the centre of the war declared to the study of philosophy by some conservative Provençal scholars at the beginning of the fourteenth century in Languedoc.⁶⁸ *Livyat Hen* is divided into two parts, called “pillars.” The first part is an extensive scientific encyclopaedia, almost totally lost. The second part consists of an extensive series of allegorical interpretations of verses and *aggadot*, thematically classified, edited in the last decade in four volumes by Howard Kreisel.⁶⁹ In this part, Levi ben Avraham endeavours to find the knowledge he exposed in the first part in the words of the prophets and the rabbis. It is as if the treatise was written twice but under two discursive regimes: first by using a progressive mode of exposition, starting from ignorance and progressing in knowledge by the use of scientific reasoning, and second by using a regressive mode, starting from the knowledge acquired in the first part and trying to “discover” it again in the authoritative writings.

This second discursive mode is not only a manner of confirming philosophical knowledge. Rather, it contributes, in the perspective of post-Maimonidean philosopher-exegetes, to their own acquisition of scientific knowledge. By producing an exegetical effort to repeat the discovery of Aristotelian science in the Jewish texts, they actually appropriate this knowledge. Allegorical exegesis of the Bible and *aggadot* is to be understood as some sort of “spiritual exercise.”⁷⁰ This laborious effort to harmonize the Jewish sources with philosophical theses actually constitutes a way through which the philosopher turns these theses into his own knowledge. The general epistemic framework of our authors is that of a pre-modern “spirituality.” For them, exegesis participates in the definition Michel Foucault gave to this term: the methods the subject uses to transform himself in order to gain access to the truth and the way in which in return this access transforms the subject of knowledge.⁷¹

⁶⁷ See Warren Z. Harvey, “Levi ben Abraham’s Controversial Encyclopedia,” in *The Medieval Hebrew Encyclopedias of Science and Philosophy: Proceedings of the Bar-Ilan University Conference*, ed. Steven Harvey (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000): 171–190; Abraham S. Halkin, “Why Was Levi Ben Hayyim Hounded?,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 34 (1966): 65–76.

⁶⁸ See Gregg Stern, *Philosophy and Rabbinic Culture: Jewish Interpretation and Controversy in Medieval Languedoc* (London: Routledge, 2009), 178–179.

⁶⁹ Levi ben Avraham, *Livyat Hen*, H. Kreisel ed. (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies–The Rabbi David Moses and Amalia Rosen Foundation, 2004 & 2013) and (Beer Sheva, Ben Gurion University Press, 2007 & 2014). Before *Livyat Hen*, Levi first composed an encyclopaedia in rhymed verses, *Battei ha-Nefesh we-ha-Lehashim*, also partly edited by Kreisel.

⁷⁰ Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2002). I am much indebted to Josef Stern’s use of this reference in his interpretation of Maimonides’ interpretation of parables and sophisticated writing in the *Guide*, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides’ Guide*, especially 7–8 and 96.

⁷¹ Michel Foucault, *L’herméneutique du sujet* (Paris: Gallimard–Le Seuil, 2001), 17.

Scientific and logical discursivities produce an objective knowledge, religious hermeneutics contributes to its appropriation by an individual subject.

A sceptical *praxis* for a dogmatic philosophy

A significant example of exegetical “spiritual exercise” is to be found in the philosophical interpretation of the book Job, which constituted a genuine genre in the Maimonidean tradition. Robert Eisen dedicated a monograph to the various ways Maimonides, Samuel Ibn Tibbon, Zerahia Hen, Gersonides, interpreted the biblical philosophical tale.⁷² The dialectical nature of the book offers each interpreter an opportunity to clarify his view and arguments through a commentary on Job’s and his friends’ contentions. This clarification is both a way for the interpreter to expose to his readers and to confirm for himself his own specific view on providence.

As we already observed in the case of Maimonides’ own approach to prophetic parables, it is not rare to find an author propose several interpretations of one and the same *aggadah* without deciding between them. Commenting on the plurality of interpretations of biblical verses found in the *midrashim*, Levi ben Abraham writes: “They interpret one and the same verse in different ways because of the profound nature of its subject (*le-‘omeq ‘inyano*). It is no wonder if the hidden subjects support a diversity of thoughts and explanations (*yisbelu sevarot u-ferushim rabbim*).”⁷³

The last sentence, “the hidden subjects *support* a diversity of thoughts and explanations,” turns out to be very representative of the practice of exegesis of our authors. It aims at grounding an idea or a knowledge on a text that supports it rather than explicating its “true meaning.” The fact that post-Maimonidean philosophical-exegetical practice is not concerned with the actual content of the verse, but constitutes rather the “performance of a *formal exercise*, the sole aim of which is to extract a certain rational truth from a verse,” was already noted by J. Sermoneta in his study on Juda Romano’s prophetology.⁷⁴ Sermoneta sees in this feature the result of a crisis of the Maimonidean tradition: while Maimonides did believe in the total harmony of Scripture with the Aristotelian sciences, his followers would soon have realized the impossibility of finding a term by term correspondence between a biblical passage and a

⁷² Robert Eisen, *The Book of Job in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁷³ Levi ben Abraham, *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and The Gate of the Haggadah* [Hebrew], ed. Howard Kreisel (Jerusalem: Ben Gurion University Press, 2014), 234.

⁷⁴ Giuseppe Sermoneta, “R. Yehudah Romano on Prophecy” [Hebrew], *Da’at: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy & Kabbalah* 8 (1982): 61 (our emphasis); Sermoneta, “Prophecy in the Writings of R. Yehuda Romano,” in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, vol. 2, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 44.

precise element of the scientific knowledge.⁷⁵ We observe rather a continuity between Maimonides and his followers on that point, since as we saw Maimonides was himself sceptical about the very possibility to reach a verses' true intention (except in cases when it was transmitted by tradition).

Such a deliberately "subjective" exegetical path is intriguing in the context of Averroist authors, since Averroes repeatedly invokes – without disclosing it – the existence of a "sure interpretation" (*ta'wil yaqīnī*⁷⁶) or a "true interpretation" (*ta'wil ṣaḥīḥī*⁷⁷) of the verses that the philosophers have to seek. Instead of certitude and truth, we constantly find in the writings of post-Maimonidean authors such as Levi marks of doubt and uncertainty introducing their interpretations of biblical and rabbinic texts.⁷⁸

Their exegesis may therefore be described as "a sceptical *praxis* for a dogmatic philosophy" – "dogmatic" in view of their general unquestioned acceptance of the tenets of Averroistic Aristotelianism.

A paradoxical theoretician: Isaac Albalag

The general worldview shared by most post-Maimonidean authors rests on the admission of the unity of truth. Since the truth cannot be self-contradictory and since revelation is assumed to deliver the truth, there can be no contradiction between revealed texts and philosophy. Yet, it is paradoxically Isaac Albalag (second half of the thirteenth century, Northern Spain), an author famous for his statements in favour of a "double truth" – or, rather, "double belief" – theory,⁷⁹ who designed the theoretical framework of post-Maimonidean practice of philosophical exegesis. In his only extant work, the *Tiqqun ha-De'ot*,⁸⁰ a commentary of Al-Ghāzālī's *Intentions of the philosophers*, Albalag adopts a number of radical philosophical views that contradict generally admitted religious ideas (such as creation *de novo*, God's free will, and God's

⁷⁵ Sermoneta, "R. Yehudah Romano on Prophecy," 54–55.

⁷⁶ Averroes, *Decisive Treatise*, §44, 26.

⁷⁷ Averroes, *Decisive Treatise*, §51, 29.

⁷⁸ To take only a few examples in a representative sequence of Levi ben Avraham's *Sha'ar ha-Aggadah* (a section of *Livyat Hēn* dedicated to the interpretation of various *aggadot*): "maybe," *"ulay"* (ed. Howard Kreisel [Beer Sheva: Ben Gurion University Press, 2014], 267); *"efshar she-"* (285); *"efshar ki"* (286); "it seems plausible to explain," *"nir'eh (lanu) le-paresh"* (280, 283, 294); "alternative explanation," *"perush aher"* (289–290); "I have several explanations for this parable," *"yesh li be-zeh ha-mashal perushim"* (305).

⁷⁹ According to Alain de Libera, in his preface to Averroes, *Discours décisif*, French trans. Marc Geoffroy (Paris: Flammarion, 1996), 80, Albalag was actually the only author in the thirteenth century who actually held this much controversial doctrine.

⁸⁰ Isaac Albalag, *Sefer Tiqqun ha-De'ot*, ed. Georges Vajda (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1973).

knowledge of the particulars). Facing similar contradictions, Maimonides and his disciples, as well as Averroes, would argue that the contradiction is only apparent: only the manifest meaning of the revealed texts contradicts philosophical knowledge. An appropriate exegesis would show that the true inner meaning of the prophetic texts is in harmony with the demonstrative truth. Albalag does not take this path. On the contrary, he acknowledges the existence of possible genuine contradictions between revelation and scientific knowledge. Such contradictions tally with the anthropological distinction between the vulgar and the intellectual elite. Prophetic texts are meant for the vulgar and deliver beliefs that correspond with the understanding of the common man and are necessary in order to grant social peace. Philosophical knowledge, on the other hand, is reserved for those who possess the required intellectual skills.⁸¹ Nevertheless, in a passage of the long §30 of his treatise, Albalag affirms that, while he *knows* the demonstrative doctrines to be true, he still *believes* in the prophetic statements, even in cases in which they are contradictory.⁸²

Albalag's sincerity in his declarations on double belief has often been doubted on the grounds of the boldness of his philosophical doctrines.⁸³ Affirming that, when a contradiction exists between the revealed and the scientific truths, one can still believe in the former while knowing the latter, is indeed an efficient way to develop an heterodox doctrine without explicitly denying the authority of tradition. This would imply that Albalag had really no interest in Scripture and the rabbinic texts. However, these statements on double truth occur precisely in §30 of the *Tiqqun ha-De'ot*, in a context where he develops a full-fledged exegetical methodology. This methodology as well as the double truth theory derives from Albalag's prophetology according to which the nature of prophetic knowledge is essentially different from that of philosophical knowledge.⁸⁴ Therefore, only a prophet can know the true meaning of a prophetic statement and, since we do not have a reliable tradition going back

⁸¹ Albalag, *Sefer Tiqqun ha-De'ot*, Introduction, 2–3.

⁸² Albalag, *Sefer Tiqqun ha-De'ot*, §30, 43–44.

⁸³ See Georges Vajda, *Isaac Albalag: averroïste juif, traducteur et annotateur d'Al-Ghazâlî* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1960), 265 and, more recently, Shalom Sadik, "La doctrine de la double vérité dans la pensée philosophique de Rabbi Isaac Albalag," *Revue des Études Juives* 174, no. 1–2 (2015): 154–174.

⁸⁴ "The prophetic truths cannot be grasped except by the prophet and they cannot be received except from the prophet or someone who received from him [...]. The wise cannot apprehend them more than the fool, since they are hidden things, which concern only the prophet. Just like the demonstrative knowledge requires a demonstrative faculty, the divine knowledge requires a divine faculty (*koah elohi*)," Albalag, *Sefer Tiqqun ha-De'ot*, §30, 4. This prophetology may derive from that of Juda Halevi. See Charles Touati, "Vérité philosophique et vérité prophétique chez Isaac Albalag," *Revue des Études Juives* 121, no. 1–2 (1962): 35–47, esp. 42 and Sarah Klein-Braslavy, "Vérité prophétique et vérité philosophique chez Nissim de Gérone. Une interprétation du 'Récit de la Création' et du 'Récit du Char,'" *Revue des Études Juives* 134, no. 3 (1975): 75–99, esp. 92.

to the prophet, it is impossible to know for sure the genuine intention of a verse.⁸⁵ Albalag thus recognizes the existence of a true inner meaning of the verses, hidden behind their manifest meaning. But, given the heterogeneity of prophetic and rational knowledge, no one can ascertain having grasped the verses' true intention. In very similar terms to those used by Spinoza, Albalag criticizes Maimonides' exegesis of the prophetic parables because the latter considers "that his own idea is the actual doctrine of the prophet."⁸⁶ According to Albalag, the identification of prophetic and philosophical truths is problematic not only from an exegetical perspective, because it leads to twist the meaning of the prophetic text, but also from a philosophical perspective. In cases where Maimonides was not able to totally harmonize Scripture with philosophical knowledge,⁸⁷ he was led to deny the demonstrated truth because it contradicted the literal meaning of Scriptures.

In respect of his prophetology, it could be expected that Albalag would renounce any interpretation of a verse. Why would he bother seeking an interpretation a text whose meaning is assumed to be inaccessible? But, in §30, Albalag not only acknowledges the utility of philosophical exegesis, but he actually proposes at length an allegorical interpretation of the biblical narrative of creation. As regards his own exegetical approach, Albalag states:

Even when it appears that a verse sustains (*sovel*) a demonstrative doctrine (*da'at mofti*), I am not sure that this is undoubtedly the meaning of the verse and not another. It is not my intention to suggest to you that my belief is identical with the explanations I propose here, nor enjoin you to adopt them as a belief. Rather, I only wish to indicate that it is possible to ground (*li-smokh*) a speculative doctrine on a verse, which sustains (*sovel*) it as well as it sustains the opposite doctrine and even others.⁸⁸

Despite Albalag's criticism of Maimonides' method of biblical interpretation, this description is actually much reminiscent of Maimonides' own words regarding his interpretation of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and his admission of possible alternative interpretations to his own.⁸⁹ Albalag radicalizes Maimonides' sceptical considerations

⁸⁵ "As the number of transmitters and receivers grows, so does doubts in the mind of the receiver. His belief [in the traditional doctrine] weakens, because it is possible that it was altered in the course of time." (Albalag, *Sefer Tiqqun ha-De'ot*, §30, 4). See also, his criticism of contemporary kabbalists, who claim they dispose of a sure tradition (*index s.v. "mequbbalim"*).

⁸⁶ Albalag, *Sefer Tiqqun ha-De'ot*, §30, 44 (see also, for the distinction between his own and Maimonides' exegetical methods, 51–52).

⁸⁷ Albalag is probably referring to the question of creation. On this issue, see Seymour Feldman, "An Averroist Solution to a Maimonidean Perplexity," in *Maimonidean Studies: Vol. 4*, ed. Arthur Hyman (New York: Yeshivah University, 2000): 15–30.

⁸⁸ Albalag, *Sefer Tiqqun ha-De'ot*, 43–44.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

regarding access to the “true meaning” of parables and makes its implications more explicit.

Earlier in his text, Albalag explicitly identified his own exegetical method with the use of verses as simple support (*asmakhta be-‘alma*) by the rabbis in the Talmud and *Midrashim*. Just like the ancient rabbis did, he first establishes a speculative doctrine by means of rational thinking and only later tries to find a Scriptural source to support it. He adds that the rabbis sometimes even decided to use a verse that had really nothing to do with the doctrine they wished to express, explaining why some *derashot* appear very far-fetched.⁹⁰ The notion of *asmakhta be-‘alma*, whose scope was implicitly extended in Maimonides’ *halakhic* works through his use of the term *isnād*, is explicitly identified as the usual tool of rabbinic hermeneutics in matters of *aggadah*. Rather than an ironic criticism of classical *midrashic* exegesis, such an identification of rabbinic and philosophical methods of interpretation is a legitimization of a specific type of exegetical practice as a “spiritual exercise.” Medieval philosophical interpretations, far from betraying the rabbinic tradition, are presented as faithful to its specific mode of interpretation or use of the canonical texts.

Even though he did not think he disclosed the true meaning of verses or teachings, and even though he actually did not think it possible, Albalag nevertheless endeavours to read his own ideas *in* the Jewish texts. This is indeed a very peculiar intellectual practice, which is to be understood as an attempt to appropriate a knowledge threatening to remain foreign to the subject.

Conclusion

Maimonidean and post-Maimonidean exegesis was frequently attacked as an artificial exercise of *reading into* traditional texts ideas obviously foreign to them. This forcing of the texts is often understood as denoting the philosophers’ lack of real interest in these texts. I have tried to show how these authors actually acknowledged the artificiality of their readings and yet did not consider exegesis as unimportant or extra-philosophical.

Maimonides’ “dogmatic” endeavour in *halakhah* aimed at fixing the law in order to liberate time and intellectual energy for the study of important philosophical questions. And yet the methodological matrix of post-Maimonidean interpretation of

⁹⁰ “The truth is first acquired through [demonstration] and only after one looks for a support (*asmakhta*) in Scripture. This is the method I apply each time I use Scripture or Talmud to support a speculative doctrine (*ani somekh le-Torah u-le-Talmud min ha-de‘ot ha-‘iyyuniot*). [...] The method of our Sages is the same or almost. They first resolve the question through the speculative method and then, if they find a Scriptural text whose literal meaning conveys the same idea, they allege it as a proof. If not, they use, as a support for their doctrine, any verse which does not refer to it (*le-shum katuv bilti mekhuwwan le-‘inyan ha-hu’*).” Albalag, *Sefer Tiqqun ha-De‘ot*, 37–38.

aggadah is to be found in his interpretation of the rabbinic process of interpretation in matters of *halakhah* as a sort of *reading in*, an *a fortiori* grounding of an opinion on a verse. If his own position on the philosophical value of *aggadah* remains debatable, his followers clearly saw in *aggadot* a massive *corpus* which could serve as a textual support to nativise their scientific knowledge. Renouncing the goal to disclose the ultimate meaning of verses or teachings, their exegesis is a free effort of thought to rediscover a truth previously acquired through demonstrative reasoning within a biblical or Talmudic text.

This type of thought might be described as a hermeneutic rationality, and the *praxis* of exegesis in post-Maimonidean philosophy as a sceptical *praxis* for a dogmatic philosophy.

Selected Bibliography

- Albalag, Isaac. *Sefer Tiqqun ha-De'ot*. Edited by Georges Vajda. Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1973.
- Cohen, Mordechai Z. *Opening the Gates of Interpretation: Maimonides' Biblical Hermeneutics in Light of His Geonic-Andalusian Heritage and Muslim Milieu*. Leiden: Brill, 2011.
- Cohen, Mordechai Z. "Talmudist's Halakhic Hermeneutics: A New Understanding of Maimonides' Principle of Peshat Primacy." *Jewish Studies, an Internet Journal* 10 (2012): 257–359.
- Diamond, James Arthur. *Maimonides and the Hermeneutics of Concealment: Deciphering Scripture and Midrash in the Guide of the Perplexed*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002.
- Halbertal, Moshe. *Maimonides: Life and Thought*. Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013.
- Halbertal, Moshe. "Sefer Ha-Mizwot of Maimonides – His Architecture of Halakha and Theory of Interpretation." *Tarbiz* 59, no. 3/4 (1990): 457–80.
- Heinemann, Isaak. "Die Wissenschaftliche Allegoristik Des Jüdischen Mittelalters." *Hebrew Union College Annual* 23, no. 1 (1951): 611–43.
- Ibn Tibbon, Moshe, *Sefer Pe'ah*, in Sirat, Colette, and Howard Kreisel, eds. *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*. Beer-Sheva: Ben Gurion University Press, 2010.
- Klein-Braslavy, Sara. *Maimonides' Interpretation of the Story of Creation*. [Hebrew] Jerusalem: Reuven Mas, 1987.
- Levi ben Abraham ben Ḥayyim. *Livyat Hen*. Edited by Howard Kreisel. Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies; Rabbi David Moses and Amalia Rosen Foundation, 2004; 2013.
- Levi ben Abraham ben Ḥayyim. *Livyat Hen*. Edited by Howard Kreisel. Beer-Sheva: Ben Gurion University Press, 2007; 2014.
- Lorberbaum, Yair. "Changes in Maimonides' Approach to Aggadah." [Hebrew] *Tarbiz* 79, no. 1 (2008): 81–122.
- Lorberbaum, Yair. "Maimonides on Philosophical Parables." [Hebrew] *Tarbiz* 71, no. 1–2 (2002): 87–132.
- Maimonides, Moses. *Dalālat Al-Ḥā'irīn*. Edited by Salomon Munk and Issachar Joel. Jerusalem: Azrieli, 1931.
- Maimonides, Moses. *Mishnah 'im Perush ha-Rambam. Maqor We-Targum*. Edited by Yosef Kafiḥ. Vol. 1. Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1963.
- Maimonides, Moses. *Sefer Ha-Mitswot. Maqor We-Targum*. Edited by Yosef Kafiḥ. Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1971.

- Maimonides, Moses. *The Guide of the Perplexed*. Translated by Shlomo Pines. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963.
- Sadik, Shalom. "La doctrine de la double vérité dans la pensée philosophique de Rabbi Isaac Albalag." *Revue des Études Juives* 174, no. 1–2 (2015): 154–74.
- Saperstein, Marc. *Decoding the Rabbis: A Thirteenth-Century Commentary on the Aggadah*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1980.
- Sermoneta, Giuseppe. "R. Yehudah Romano on Prophecy." *Da'at : A Journal of Jewish Philosophy & Kabbalah* 8 (1982): 53–86.
- Sirat, Colette. "Les déraison des *Aggadot* du Talmud et leur explication rationnelle : le *Sefer Péa* et la *Rhétorique* d'Aristote." *Bulletin de Philosophie Médiévale* 47 (2005): 69–86.
- Stern, Josef. "Philosophy or Exegesis: Some Critical Comments." In *Judaeo-Arabic Studies: Proceedings of the Founding Conference of the Society for Judaeo-Arabic Studies*, edited by Norman Golb, 213–28. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997.
- Stern, Josef. *The Matter and Form of Maimonides' Guide*. Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 2013.
- Strauss, Leo. "The Literary Character of the *Guide of the Perplexed*." In *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 38–94. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- Talmage, Frank. "Apples of Gold: The Inner Meaning of Sacred Texts in Medieval Judaism." In *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible through the Middle Ages*, edited by Arthur Green, 313–53. New York: Crossroad, 1987.
- Vajda, Georges. *Isaac Albalag: averroïste juif, traducteur et annotateur d'Al-Ghazâlî*. Paris: Vrin, 1960.

Racheli Haliva

The Origin of the World – An Anti-Sceptical Approach in Medieval Jewish Averroism

Introduction

Numerous attempts were made in the Middle Ages by philosophers and theologians to explain the origin of the world. Positioning themselves with regard to this crucial issue was particularly important for medieval thinkers of all religions since it indicated their relation to one of the fundamental principles of their faith.

In this article, I wish to focus on the anti-sceptical approach offered by Isaac Albalag and his contemporary Isaac Polqar (two Jewish Averroists in the fourteenth century who lived in northern Spain) to one of the most fundamental questions every religious philosopher has to address: is the world created by God *ex-nihilo* and *de novo*, that is from absolute non-existence, as suggested by traditionalists, or, is the world eternal, as argued by Aristotle? Jewish Averroists in this context are Jewish philosophers from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries whose worldview had two main characteristics: first, they adopted the philosophy of Averroes, whom they considered the best interpreter of Aristotle. Second, they interpreted Judaism in light of Averroes' Aristotelianism on the assumption that Judaism and true philosophy must always coincide.

I will begin with a brief discussion of the eleventh-century Muslim theologian Al-Ghazālī, who charges the philosophers with heresy for defending, inter alia, the Aristotelian doctrine of the eternity of the world. Al-Ghazālī posed the most significant opposition to the anti-sceptical opinion held later by Averroes and his Jewish followers. Discussing Al-Ghazālī's view allows for a better understanding of the positions of Averroes, Maimonides, and the Jewish Averroists, for it stands in the background and constitutes a fundamental critique of the philosophers. I will then examine the sceptical position of Maimonides as presented in his *Guide of the Perplexed* as well as his non-sceptical view as presented in the *Mishneh Torah*. Finally, I will analyse Albalag and Polqar's anti-sceptical view, according to which the world exists as a result of what they call "eternal creation" (*hidush nitzḥi*). Their argument is divided into three sections. In the first section, they philosophically demonstrate the eternity of the world in light of Averroes' interpretation of Aristotle. In the second section, they provide biblical texts and rabbinic sources to support their claim. In the third section, they discuss creation from a grammatical point of view, arguing that the word "*Bereshit*," the first word of the Bible that is conventionally translated as "in the beginning," can be understood in a non-temporal manner.

Note: I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their useful criticisms, comments, and suggestions.

Al-Ghazālī's critique against the philosophers

In his intellectual autobiography, *Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* [The Deliverance from Error], and in his *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* [The Incoherence of the Philosophers], Al-Ghazālī criticizes the philosophers for denying what he considered three fundamental principles of faith:

The three points in which they [philosophers] differ from all the Muslims are as follows: (a) they say that for bodies there is no resurrection; it is bare spirits which are rewarded or punished; and the rewards and punishments are spiritual, not bodily. They certainly speak truth in affirming the spiritual ones, since these do exist as well; but they speak falsely in denying the bodily ones and in their pronouncements disbelieve the Divine law; (b) they say that God knows universals but not particulars. This too is plain unbelief. The truth is that "there does not escape Him the weight of the atom in the heavens or in the earth" (Q. 34:3); (c) they say that the world is everlasting, without beginning or end. But no Muslim has adopted any such view on the question.¹

According to Al-Ghazālī, the Muslim philosophers are infidels who entirely oppose the teaching of Islam because they deny (1) that after death, human souls return into bodies, (2) that God knows particulars in addition to knowing universals, and (3) that the world had a beginning and was created in time.

With regard to the philosophers' denial that the world has a beginning, Al-Ghazālī argues that the philosophers' claim that the world is eternal cannot be demonstratively proven and therefore we are not obligated to accept it.² According to Al-Ghazālī, since one cannot demonstrate the Aristotelian view of the eternity of the world,³ we must be sceptical about the human intellectual ability to attain this knowledge and we have to turn to other sources of knowledge to answer whether the world was created *ex nihilo* or if it is eternal. Averroes' and the Jewish Averroists' attempts to present an anti-sceptical approach precisely address Al-Ghazālī's claims. As we shall see, Averroes and his Jewish followers made a great effort to refute Al-Ghazālī's position not only philosophically but also hermeneutically, that is, through an undertaking in scriptural interpretation.

¹ Al-Ghazālī, *Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* [The Deliverance from Error] [all references to Al-Ghazālī's *Deliverance from error* are from W. Montgomery Watt's revised translation (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2005)], 26.

² Cf. George F. Hourani, "The Dialogue Between Al-Ghazālī and the Philosophers on the Origin of the World," *MW* 48 (1958): 183–191; Oliver Leaman, *Averroes and his Philosophy* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1998), 15–41; *An Introduction to Classical Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 25–29; Michael E. Marmura, "The Conflict over the World's Pre-Eternity in the *Tahāfut* of Al-Ghazālī and Ibn Rushd" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1959).

³ Al-Ghazālī expresses a more extreme view regarding man's ability to attain true knowledge based on sense perception or Reason. Cf. *Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* [The Deliverance from Error], 10–11 where Al-Ghazālī clearly states that knowledge based on the senses can deceive us and that demonstrative proofs require knowledge based on first principles that are not always available.

Maimonides' sceptical approach

Maimonides, who sought to reconcile the Torah with scientific investigation, devoted a large portion of the *Guide of the Perplexed* to discussing the question of creation. However, despite this extensive discussion, both medieval thinkers and later commentators, up to the present day, have been unable to decisively agree on Maimonides' genuine view.

Determining Maimonides' view regarding the issue of the origin of the world depends to a large extent upon which texts one chooses to examine. While in the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides' halakhic work, he seems to endorse the Aristotelian view of the eternity of the world, the *Guide of the Perplexed*, which was written after the *Mishneh Torah*, presents an unclear approach. On the one hand, Maimonides espouses Aristotelian physics which leads to the conclusion that the world is eternal and on the other, he makes a great effort to establish the belief in creation *ex-nihilo* as one of the fundamental principles of Judaism. As we shall see, he argues in *The Guide* that, since neither of these theories can be demonstratively proven, we should accept creation on the basis of prophecy.⁴

Even though *the Guide of the Perplexed* was written after the *Mishneh Torah*, I will begin the discussion with Maimonides' presentation of his sceptical view in the *Guide*. In 2:13, Maimonides presents three opinions concerning the origin of the world:

The opinion [...] of *all* who believe [*Kul man i'tiqad*] in the Law of Moses [...] [which is] that the world as a whole [...] after absolute pure nonexistence (*ba'ad al-'adam al-mahḍ al-mutlaq/aḥar ha-he'der hamuḥlat*) [...] through [God's] will and volition, [was] brought into existence out of nothing [...] The [...] opinion of [...] [Plato]⁵ [...] [which is] [...] that there exists a certain matter that is eternal as the deity is eternal [...] It [does not have] the same rank in what exists as He [...] but [...] He is the cause of its existence; and [...] He creates in it whatever He wishes. Thus He sometimes forms out of it a heaven and an earth, and sometimes He forms out of it something else [...] The [...] opinion [...] of Aristotle,⁶ his followers, and the commentators of his books [...] He thinks that this being as a whole, such as it is has never ceased to be and will never do so; that the permanent thing not subject to generation and passing-away, namely, the heaven, likewise does not cease to be; [...] and that thing is subject to generation and passing-away, namely, that which is beneath the sphere of the moon, does not cease to be.⁷

⁴ *The Guide of the Perplexed*, 2:16, (trans. Shlomo Pines [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963], 294.

⁵ Plato, *Timaeus*, in, 27–38 (Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper [Indianapolis&Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997]: 27–38, 1234–1242.

⁶ Cf. Aristotle, *Physics*, I 7, 190b; *De Caelo*, III,2; *Metaphysics*, III, 4, 999b. Here Aristotle argues that nothing can come into existence out of “that which is not.” (References are from *The Complete Work of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984]).

⁷ *The Guide of the Perplexed*, 2:13, (Pines' translation, pp. 281–284. Maimonidean scholars often link this chapter with 2:32 of the *Guide*, in which Maimonides discusses the phenomenon of prophecy. Such a connection stems from Maimonides' own words: “The opinions of people concerning prophecy are like their opinions concerning the eternity of the world or its Creation in time.” The scholars who connect these two chapters assume that Maimonides thus guides his careful readers to perceive more than just a numerical identity between the two sets of opinions. Kaplan, for example, argues

The first view is what Maimonides presents as the opinion of Moses, according to which the world as a whole was created after the absolute nonexistence. In this view, all who follow the Mosaic Law, whether the philosophers or the vulgar (*hamon*) share a similar opinion regarding the origin of the world. One might wonder whether Maimonides genuinely thought from an epistemological point of view that common men and philosophers could hold the same opinion, especially since he warned his readers at the beginning of the *Guide* with the following⁸:

Thus we have mentioned there [in our legal compilations] that the *Account of the Beginning* is identical with natural science, and the *Account of the Chariot* with divine science. For my purpose is that the truths be glimpsed and then again be concealed, so as not to oppose that divine purpose which one cannot possibly oppose and which has concealed from the vulgar among the people those truths especially requisite for His apprehension [...] know that with regard to natural matters as well it is impossible to give a clear exposition when teaching some of

that the thematic correspondence should be read in the following way: the first view of creation, that of those who believe in the Law of Moses, namely, who believe in creation after absolute pure nonexistence, corresponds to the third opinion concerning prophecy, namely, that prophecy is the outcome of a natural process, but that God can miraculously intervene in the natural process and prevent one from prophesying; the second opinion, the Platonic view according to which the world was created from preexisting matter, corresponds to the first opinion concerning prophecy, that God can turn whoever He wishes into a prophet. The third opinion about creation, the Aristotelian view according to which the world is eternal and has no beginning and no end, corresponds to the philosophers' opinion according to which prophecy is a natural process. Kaplan follows Kafih and argues that Maimonides defends the idea that the world follows a fixed natural order and that miracles are possible in this fixed natural order. See, Lawrence Kaplan, "Maimonides On the Miraculous Element in Prophecy," *Harvard Theological Review* 70 (1977): 233–256. Davidson argues that Maimonides may have embraced the Platonic view concerning the question of the origin of the cosmos. According to him, the first opinion concerning creation (*ex nihilo*) corresponds to the first opinion – the vulgar – concerning prophecy (God can turn anyone into a prophet). The Platonic view (creation from preexisting matter) corresponds to the third opinion – that of those who follow the Mosaic Law – that prophecy is a natural process that can be miraculously prevented by God. And, finally, the Aristotelian view (the eternity of the world) corresponds to the "philosophers'" view on prophecy, according to which prophecy is the result of a natural process. See, Herbert Davidson, "Maimonides' Secret Position on Creation," *Studies in Medieval in Jewish History and Literature* I (1979): 16–40. Finally, Harvey argues that Maimonides remained an Aristotelian on this question. According to Harvey, the first opinion on creation ("the opinion [...] of all who believe in the Mosaic Law") corresponds to the first opinion regarding prophecy ("the vulgar"); the second opinion on creation (the Platonic) corresponds to the philosophers'; and the third opinion on creation, that of Aristotle, corresponds the opinion of Mosaic law (Prophecy is a natural process, but God can miraculously prevent it). See Warren Zev Harvey, "A Third Approach to Maimonides' Cosmogony-Prophetology Puzzle," *Harvard Theological Review* 74, 3 (1981), 287–301.

⁸ Note that in the *Guide* 1:35 Maimonides insists that the vulgar should be taught that God is one and incorporeal. Although both the philosopher and the vulgar say they believe in one and simple God who is incorporeal, their level of understanding the statement "God is one and incorporeal" differs fundamentally.

their principles as they are. For you know the saying of [the Sages] [...] *The Account of the Beginning ought not to be taught in the presence of two men.*⁹

If we consider Maimonides' statement of purpose as described above to be genuine, then we must reject the idea that philosophers and the vulgar hold the same opinion with regard to *The Account of the Beginning*. Moreover, if we examine Maimonides' legal works – the *Mishneh Torah*¹⁰ and the *Commentary on the Mishnah*¹¹ – as he suggests, we will find that the opinion of “all who believe [*Kul man i'taqad*] in the Law of Moses” refers to the vulgar alone, not to the philosophers who, in fact, follow the Aristotelian line of thought.

The second opinion is that of Plato, according to which the world was created from a pre-existing matter. The third opinion is that of Aristotle and his disciples. According to them the world is eternal and is not subject to generation and passing-away. A few chapters later, Maimonides introduces his sceptical approach for the question of the origin of the world, according to which none of these views can be demonstratively proven. He writes: “Now inasmuch as [...] this question – I mean to say that of the eternity of the world or its creation in time – becomes an open question, it should in my opinion be accepted without proof because of prophecy, which explains things to which it is not in the power of speculation to accede.”¹² Since we cannot provide a demonstrative proof for either the eternity of the world or creation *ex nihilo*, claims Maimonides, we must rely on tradition, namely, prophecy. Here we apparently have an example of Maimonides' scepticism in the service of faith.

The fact that Maimonidean scholars do not agree whether Maimonides held the traditional exoteric view, namely, creation *ex nihilo*, or an esoteric opinion, whether Platonic or Aristotelian, indicates one of two things: either he believed it was unsafe to reveal his true opinion – one of the Greek opinions – to the vulgar or he could not demonstratively prove either opinion using scientific and philosophical means, and, therefore, presented the alternatives without decisively endorsing one.

An analysis of Maimonides' view regarding the origin of the world divides Maimonidean scholars into four groups of scholars. The first group includes scholars who suggest ascribing to Maimonides the traditional view according to which God created the world in time after absolute nonexistence. The second group consists of scholars who maintain that Maimonides remained loyal to Aristotle's philosophy and that, despite his apparently ambiguous attitude, he advocated de facto the theory of the eternity of the world. The third group includes scholars who maintain that Maimonides presented the two, or three, possibilities without committing himself to any

⁹ *Guide*, Introduction to the First Part, pp. 6–7.

¹⁰ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Laws Concerning the Foundations of the Torah*, 12 vols, ed. Shabtei Frankel (Jerusalem: Hosaat Shabtei Frankel, 2000), 1:1–7.

¹¹ Babylonian Talmud, *Tractate Hagigah*, chapter 2.

¹² *The Guide of the Perplexed*, 2:16 (Shlomo Pines translation, p. 294).

view of Maimonides, most of these Jewish thinkers suggested that Genesis 1 must be read as affirming Aristotle's view of the eternity of world.

In contrast to the sceptical view presented in *the Guide*, Maimonides, at least in the way Albalag and Polqar read the text, seems to support the opinion of the eternity of the world in the opening section of his halakhic work *Mishneh Torah*, laws concerning the foundations of the Torah 1:5:

This being [entity that there is no true existence like it] is the God of the world and the Lord of the entire earth. He controls the sphere with infinite and unlimited power. This power [continues] without interruption, because the sphere is *constantly revolving* [*tamid*], and it is impossible for it to revolve without someone causing it to revolve. [That one is] He, blessed be He, who causes it to revolve without a hand or any [other] corporeal dimension.¹⁵

If the sphere is constantly revolving, God, the controlling being of the world, constantly – past, present, and future – causes the motion of the celestial spheres and hence of the universe as a whole. “The sphere is constantly revolving” [*tamid*] is Maimonides' way of saying that the world always existed. Later, in *Mishneh Torah* 1:7, Maimonides argues that God's unity and incorporeality can be proven *only* if we accept the eternity of the world.¹⁶

Albalag, one of the radical Jewish Averroists, takes note of Maimonides' sceptical view and says that he cannot understand why Maimonides chooses to be vague about this issue. In his major work *Tiqqun De'ot ha-Philosophim* [rectifying the opinions of the philosophers], which is a paraphrase of Al-Ghazālī's *Maqāṣid al-Falāsifa* [The Intention of the Philosophers], he writes with regard to *Laws concerning the Foundations of the Torah* 1:5 and 1:7:

This, the opinion of eternal creation, is an opinion concerning which the Torah and wisdom are in agreement. I wish I could know why Maimonides (*ha-rav ha-moreh*) did not reveal his opinion on this matter, but rather speaks [in a way of] cunning. Sometimes he implies and testifies that this is his belief and he bases his proofs upon it, as he did in the *Book of Knowledge*: when he wants to explain that the power of the Creator is unlimited he explained it on the basis of the perpetual motion of the sphere. As he states: “the power of God does not have an end or a limit,

Studies, The Rabbi David Moses and Amalia Rosen Foundation, 2001), 261. Cf. *Moreh ha-Moreh*, 259; Raphael Jospe, *Torah and Sophia: The Life and Thought of Shem Tov Ibn Falquera* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Hebrew Union College Press, 1988), 29–30.

15 Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, laws concerning the foundations of the Torah, 1:5, emphasis added.

16 In the *Laws Concerning the Foundations of the Torah* 1:7 Maimonides argues the follows: "אלוה זה אחד הוא – ואינו לא שנים...אלא אחד שאין כיחודו אחד מן האחדים הנמצאין בעולם לא אחד כמין שהוא כולל אחדים הרבה ולא אחד כגוף שהוא נחלק למחלקות ולקצות אלא יחוד שאין כיחודו יחוד אחר כמותו בעולם...ואילו היה היוצר גוף וגויה—היה לו קץ ותכלית, שאי אפשר להיות גוף שאין לו קץ. וכל שיש לו קץ ותכלית יש לבחו קץ וסוף. ואלהינו ברוך שמו הואיל וכחו אין לו קץ ואינו פוסק שהרי הגלגל סובב תמיד אין כחו כח גוף. הואיל ואינו גוף לא יארכו לו מאורעות הגופות כדי שיהא נחלק ונפרד מאחר. לפיכך אי אפשר שיהיה אלא אחד." Here Maimonides argues that since God's power is infinite (because the sphere moves continuously), it follows that He is not corporeal. And since God is not a body, it follows that He is a simple being that cannot be divided and, therefore, He is one.

for the sphere moves continuously.” And sometimes he [Maimonides] replies to the philosophers with false intellectual arguments and he strives to contradict their opinion by [using] a syllogism; and [he] says that the creation of the world is one of the Torah’s principles that cannot be denied. And I reply to him in the name of the philosophers that as he spoke [in the *Guide* namely, that the creation of the world is one of the principles of the Torah] indeed it is so. However, [this principle refers only to the] adequate [concept of] creation, not to the inadequate one. And the philosophers have no doubt that [the concept of] creation which begins from a particular moment in time is inadequate [while the idea of creation] which has no beginning and no end is a perfect one.¹⁷

According to Albalag, then, there was no reason why Maimonides should not have adopted the theory of perpetual creation in the *Guide*. Defending this position, in Albalag’s view, not only does not contradict any of the fundamental principles of Judaism, but on the contrary, reveals perpetual creation as its fundamental principle. In Albalag’s view, it is clear that Maimonides’ intention in these passages of the *Mishneh Torah* is to maintain that God’s power can be proven as infinite through the assumption that the sphere revolves constantly (*tamid*). Since the sphere is *constantly* revolving it would imply that the world is eternal.¹⁸

According to Albalag, this, in truth, is Maimonides’ view. However, he – Maimonides – had reasons to publically refute the philosophers’ arguments in favour of the eternity of the world and to insist that creation *ex nihilo* is one of the Jewish faith’s fundamental principles. Albalag enumerates three reasons for asserting the theory of perpetual creation, even though the Torah concealed this truth from the vulgar, and explains why Maimonides could not use these reasons. First, Maimonides wants to identify the plain sense of the Torah regarding creation with the philosophical truth. In his view, the message of the Torah and philosophical investigation lead to the same truth. Albalag, on the other hand, introduces his view of “two levels of truth,” separating philosophical truth, which is demonstrated by the intellect, from the plain meaning of the Torah regarding creation, the lower level of truth which is used to educate the vulgar. Second, the *Guide*, according to Albalag, was addressed to the vulgar, a strange assertion since Maimonides explicitly says that the *Guide* is not to be read by the vulgar. According to Maimonides, the *Guide*’s purpose is to guide the religious person who observes the Mosaic Law and at the same time studied the sciences and philosophy.¹⁹ The vulgar, in Maimonides’s view, is by no means the audience of the *Guide*:

As for those who never even once see a light, but grope about in their night, of them it is said: *They know not, neither do they understand; They go about in darkness* [Ps. 82:5]. The truth, in spite of the strength of its manifestation, is entirely hidden from them, as is said of them: *And now men*

¹⁷ Isaac Albalag, *Tiqqun De’ot ha-Philosophim*, chapter 30 (Vajda’s edition: 50–51).

¹⁸ Cf. Shlomo Pines, “The philosophical purport of Maimonides’ halachic works and the purport of *The Guide of the Perplexed*,” in *Maimonides and Philosophy*, eds. Shlomo Pines & Yirmiyahu Yovel (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1986), 1–14.

¹⁹ *Guide*, Introduction to the First part, trans. Shlomo Pines, 5.

see not the light which is bright in the skies. They are the vulgar among the people. There is then no occasion to mention them here in this Treatise.²⁰

The vulgar, as described in the above paragraph, are walking in the dark; they do not possess scientific and philosophical knowledge. Therefore, the vulgar are forbidden from reading the *Guide*, which attempts to reconcile between the principles of Judaism and the principles of philosophy. Albalag's *Tiqqun De'ot ha-Philosophim*, on the other hand, as he himself indicates, is a strictly philosophical book based on human knowledge rather than on faith (*derekh yedi'a enoshit lo 'al derekh emunah*).

Third, Albalag maintains, in Maimonides' time the Aristotelian view of the eternity of the world was considered heretical. In Albalag's time, however, the vulgar people identify the view that the world is eternal with the view of Epicurus according to which the world came about by chance. However, if had they been exposed to Averroes' interpretation of the Aristotelian view, that is, the view of eternal creation, they would not have considered it to be heretical.

Cosmogony within Jewish Averroism

Maimonides' sceptical voice with regard to the question of the origin of the world is interpreted unequivocally within an Aristotelian context by Jewish Averroists, mainly by Samuel ibn Tibbon, Isaac Albalag, and Isaac Polqar. Albalag and Polqar sought either to reject Maimonides in favour of Averroes or to read Maimonides as secretly teaching the doctrines of Averroes.

For Albalag and also for Polqar, the philosophical doctrine of the eternity of the world was equivalent to perpetual creation (*hidush nizhi*), which was taught by the philosophers, the Bible, and the Rabbis. Albalag titled his work *Sefer Tiqqun ha-De'ot*; on the face of it, this book aims to translate and discuss Al-Ghazālī's *Maqāṣid al-Falāsifa*. In truth, however, the book is an independent work comprised of Albalag's radical views.

Polqar, in his chief work *'Ezer ha-Dat [in Support of the Law]*, only offers his readers conclusions drawn from Averroes' and Albalag's discussions without elaborating the arguments supporting these conclusions. Albalag's rigorous approach in favour of philosophical investigation leads him to openly advocate the Aristotelian view on the question of creation, notwithstanding that he does not refer to it as "eternity of the world" but as perpetual creation (*hidush nizhi*). He supports his theory of perpetual creation with philosophical arguments, rabbinic and biblical prooftexts, and with linguistic reading of the verses as he understands them.²¹ Interestingly enough, although

²⁰ The *Guide of the Perplexed*, Introduction to the first part (Shlomo Pines translation, 7–8).

²¹ Albalag, *Sefer Tiqqun ha-De'ot*, chapter 30. All references to Albalag *Sefer Tiqqun ha-De'ot* are from Georges Vajda's edition (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1973).

Albalag's and Polqar's project is to defend Averroes' Aristotelian philosophy, they do not merely seek to prove their theory of perpetual creation from a philosophical point of view. As we shall see, similarly to Averroes, who did not want to contradict verses from the Quran, Albalag and Polqar make the same effort to convince traditional Jews and biblical commentators that the key biblical verses regarding creation actually refer to perpetual creation.

Philosophical arguments supporting eternal creation

The disagreement between the Ash'arite and the ancient philosophers with regard to the question of the origin of the world, according to Averroes, is very much connected to naming:

As for the question whether the world is eternal or has been generated, the disagreement between the Ash'arite dialectical theologians and the ancient sages almost comes back, in my view, to a disagreement about naming, especially with respect to some of the Ancients. That is because they agree that there are three sorts of existing things: two extremes and one intermediate between the extremes. And they agree about naming the two extremes but disagree about the intermediate.²²

According to Averroes, both the Ash'arite and the ancients agree that there are three kinds of being: (1) one of the two extremes which is a being that exists from something other than itself and through something, namely, by an agent. This sort of "being," argues Averroes, is what the Ash'arite and the ancients call "generated" beings (*muḥdath*); (2) the second extreme is a being that has not come into existence from something or through something and that time does not precede. The Ash'arite and the ancients, according to Averroes, refer to this kind of being as "eternal" (*qadīm*). The only existent in this category is God who is the agent of the whole; (3) the intermediate Averroes mentions is a being that has not come into existence from something and that time does not precede, however this being comes into existence by something, namely, an agent. In this category Averroes includes the world as a whole.²³

Albalag begins his discussion of creation by referring to Al-Ghazālī's two notions of agency in his *Maqāṣid al-Falāsifa*: "natural agent" and "voluntary agent."²⁴ Albalag's analysis of these two notions is deeply rooted in Averroes' discussion on the difference between the two:

²² Averroes, *Faṣl al-maqāl* [Decisive Treatise], trans. Charles Butterworth (Provo and Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2001), 14.

²³ Averroes, *Faṣl al-maqāl*, 14–15. Cf. Muammer Iskenderoğlu, *Fakhr Al-Dīn Al-Rāzī and Thomas Aquinas on the Question of the Eternity of the World* (Leiden, Boston, and Köln: Brill, 2002), 52–56.

²⁴ Cf. *TD*, chapter 30 [Vajda, 28]. See also *TD* chapter 23 [Vajda, 23–25].

We observe in the empirical world two kinds of agents, one which performs exclusively one thing and this essentially, for instance warmth which causes heat and coldness which causes cold; and this kind is called by the philosophers natural agents. The second kind of agents are those that perform a certain act at one time and its opposite at another; these, acting only out of knowledge and deliberation, are called by the philosophers voluntary and selective agents.²⁵

“Natural Agent,” according to Averroes, is an agent that performs solely one action. “Voluntary Agent” is what Averroes describes as “one that performs a certain act at one time and its opposite at another.” God, according to Averroes is neither a “natural agent” nor a “voluntary agent,” but a “divine agent”:

But the First Agent cannot be described as having either of these two actions, in so far as these are ascribed to transitory things by the philosophers. For he who chooses and wills lacks the things which he wills, and God cannot lack anything He wills. And he who chooses makes a choice for himself of the better of two things, but God is in no need of a better condition. Further, when the willer has reached his object, his will ceases and, generally speaking, will is a passive quality and a change, but God is exempt from passivity and change.²⁶

If God is neither a natural agent nor a voluntary agent, what kind of an agent is He? And, consequently, what is the relationship between God and the world, and how can we understand the existence of the world within the context of this third type of agency?

According to Averroes, since there is an essential difference between God and human beings, we must conclude that when it comes to God, choice, capacity, will, power, and wisdom are one. These attributes exist in God in a perfect manner, while they exist in human beings in an imperfect manner. Otherwise, the difference between God and humans would be effaced. Moreover, because human beings cannot fully grasp the true meaning of the unity of choice, will, power, and wisdom in God, they ascribe human attributes to God. God, according to Averroes, is the sole cause of the existence of the world, and the existence of all created things necessarily depends on God’s will (power, choice, and wisdom).

Albalag accepts Averroes’ distinction between human attributes and the attributes we ascribe to God. However, in his view, the problem of divine agency has not been fully resolved. In what way is the divine agent different from a natural or voluntary agent? The fact that there is a complete unity in God’s attributes does not mean that God cannot be perceived as a natural agent who can act only in the way determined by its nature; it also does not mean that God cannot act as a voluntary agent who perpetually acts in accordance with His wisdom. So, in order to justify the third type of agency – divine agency – Albalag maintains that, since the human attribute of choosing is essentially different from God’s choosing, we must conclude that God

²⁵ Averroes, *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut*, ¶ 148, 88. All quotations from the *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* are taken from S. Van Der Bergh’s translation (London: E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 2012).

²⁶ Ibid.

always chooses the best. In theory, God could choose to do something that is not the best, however, he *never* chooses to do so. God's actions are constant. In other words, God combines the two kinds of agency: on the one hand, He is a voluntary agent and can, theoretically, choose to act in a certain way rather than another, and, on the other hand, He acts like a natural agent by *always* choosing the best action; namely, He perpetually chooses to create the world.²⁷

Biblical and rabbinic justification of eternal creation

Albalag uses numerous examples from biblical and rabbinic texts in support of eternal creation, but we need to cite only a few sources in order to make our point. The most important example for our purposes is a line from *Shaharit*, the Morning Prayer, quoted by both Albalag and Polqar, which proclaims that God “renews His Creation continuously every day” (מחדש בכל יום תמיד מעשה בראשית).²⁸ Since Polqar quoted the same line from *Shaharit*, he probably thought that this quotation most accurately captured the theory of perpetual creation. According to Albalag and Polqar, the Jewish Sages fully understood the nature of the relationship between God and the Universe. God did not act at a certain moment in time to bring the world into existence, for this sort of action would imply change in God. God created, He creates, and He will always create the world by virtue of being its cause. A perpetual action demands a perpetual effect. Inasmuch as God exists, He will be the perpetual cause of the world; Creation, in this sense, occurs continuously.

Albalag also attempts to show that biblical verses, according to their figurative meaning, also imply eternal creation. He quotes Genesis 2:8, “*The Lord God planted a garden in Eden from eternity (mi-keddem).*” According to Albalag, the Torah alludes here to two important issues. First, the garden is the world of generation and passing away (עולם ההוויה וההפסד), and Eden represents the infinite heavens “where infinite pleasure endures.”²⁹ The river mentioned two verses later – “A river issues from Eden to water the garden and it then divides and becomes four branches” – is in Albalag's view “the general and natural form” that perpetually emanates from heaven to the sublunary world. The heavenly world continuously overflows into the world of the four elements (*four branches*). The second issue alluded to in this verse is the tight

²⁷ Cf. Seymour Feldman, “An Averroist Solution to a Maimonidean Perplexity,” *Maimonidean Studies* 4 (2000): 15–31.

²⁸ Cf. George Y. Kohler, *Reading Maimonides' Philosophy in 19th Century Germany*. 144, n. 51. Here Kohler argues that Neo-Platonic Medieval Jewish philosophers and many kabbalists interpret this morning prayer as emanation. Albalag and Polqar are not to be identified with this Neo-Platonic view since they clearly state that the dependency of all created things is causal and not temporal resulted from the First Cause.

²⁹ Albalag, *Sefer Tiqqun ha-De'ot*, chapter 30, 47.

connection between heaven and earth: both exist eternally, with no beginning (*mi-keddem*). Albalag is aware that the simple and widely accepted meaning of *mi-keddem* is *in the east* or *from the east*; however, he interprets this verse allegorically. The vulgar understand this passage as referring to an actual garden, Eden, and a river, both of which are located in the east. However, the philosophers understand the deep meaning of these verses and realize that in fact they imply eternal creation, exactly in accordance with the philosophers' understanding of cosmogony.

Interpreting “Be-re’shit”

Albalag also follows Averroes with respect to interpreting scripture; of course, for Averroes the scripture is the Quran and for Albalag it is the Hebrew Bible. Averroes argues that the Quran does not explicitly teach Creation *ex nihilo*:

In addition to all this, these opinions about the world do not conform to the apparent sense of the Law. For if the apparent sense of the Law is scrutinized, it will become apparent from the verses comprising a communication about the coming into existence of the world that, in truth, its form is generated, whereas being itself and time extend continuously at both extremes – I mean, without interruption. That is because His statement (may He be exalted): *And He is the one Who created the heavens and the earth in six days, and His throne was on the water* [11:7], requires, in its apparent sense, an existence before this existence – namely, the throne and water – and a time before this time, I mean, the one joined to the form of this existence, which is the number of the movements of the heavenly sphere [...] Nor do the dialectical theologians conform to the apparent sense of the Law in what they say about the world, but interpret it. For it is not [said] in the Law that God was existing along with sheer nothingness; no text whatever to this effect is to be found. So how is it to be conceived that the dialectical theologians' interpretation of these verses would meet with consensus when the apparent sense of the Law with respect to the existence of the world, which we have stated, has already been stated by a faction among the sages?³⁰

Here, Averroes provocatively argues that the theologians, the supposed defenders of the faith, deviated from the apparent meaning of the text and forced their interpretation onto the verses of the Quran in maintaining that the sacred text teaches the theory of creation *ex nihilo*. It follows from Averroes' analysis that, ironically enough, the philosophers' view is closer to the apparent sense of the text than that of the dialectical theologians. Moreover, since the theologians' interpretation of a verse contradicts reason, the philosophers ought to reject this interpretation and explain this verse in accordance with the intellect.

Following Averroes' line of thought, Albalag also interprets verses in accordance with the intellect, suggesting that the meaning of *Be-re'shit* is “with wisdom.” The letter *bet*, or the Arabic *bi* or *fi* according to Albalag, is to be understood as “with,”

³⁰ Averroes, *Faṣl al-maqāl*, 21–22; Cf. *The Guide of the Perplexed*, 2:26.

namely, “with” as implying an instrument (*bet ha-Keli*). *Be-re’shit* as “with wisdom” supports the theory of eternal creation, for it denies temporal creation, and instead proclaims that God’s wisdom (which is also His will, power, and choice, in keeping with Averroes’ analysis) is the instrument of eternal creation.

Albalag also offers another interpretation of *Be-re’shit*. Like Maimonides, he maintains that *be-re’shit* can be interpreted in two ways: in a temporal manner (*ibtida’*; *teḥilah*) or in a causal sense (*mabda’*; *‘illah*). The first option, temporal creation, is, according to Albalag, the opinion of the vulgar (*hamon*) who believe that the world was created at a certain time. The second interpretation is espoused by Albalag; he emphasizes that his view not only does not contradict the biblical verse but actually accords with it.³¹

Conclusion

Albalag and Polqar adopt Averroes’ approach to explain the critically important theological principle of creation. First, they argue that eternal creation is more plausible philosophically than the vulgar belief in creation *ex nihilo*. Second, they utilize the rabbinic sources such as the Morning Prayer and other biblical verses, texts that are familiar to the traditional Jew, and indicate that the sages perfectly understood the true relationship between God and the world. Third, basing their argument on the grammatical analysis of *Be-re’shit*, they maintain that God is the creator of the world in the causal rather than in the temporal sense.

Thus, against Maimonides’ sceptical view that neither creation nor eternity can be demonstrated and that, at least from a philosophical point of view, the question is open, Albalag and Polqar unequivocally opt for the philosophical position of eternal creation, reinforcing the philosophical argument with biblical and rabbinic proof-texts. Among medieval Jewish Averroists, therefore, Averroes’ rationalism triumphs over Maimonides’ scepticism.

Selected Bibliography

- Abner of Burgos (Alfonso of Valladolid). *Minḥat Qenaot*. Unpublished translation by Charles Manekin. Hebrew sections of the book translated by Isaac Baer. “The book of *Minḥat Qenaot* of Abner of Burgos and its influence on Rabbi Hasdai Crescas.” *Tarbiz* 11 (1939–40): 188–206.
- Abner of Burgos (Alfonso of Valladolid). “*Teshuvot la-Meḥaref*” [Response to the Blasphemer]. In Hecht, Jonathan L. “The Polemical Exchange between Isaac Pollegar and Abner of Burgos/Alfonso of Valladolid according to Parma MS 2440.” PhD diss., New York University, 1993.

31 Seymour Feldman, “An Averroist Solution to a Maimonidean Perplexity,” *Maimonidean Studies* 4 (2000): 19–30.

- Albalag, Isaac. *Sefer Tiqqun ha-De'ot*. Edited by Gerrges Vajda. Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1973. [Hebrew]
- Al-Ghazālī. *Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* [The Deliverance from Error]. Translated by W. Montgomery Watt. Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2005.
- Al-Ghazālī. *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* [The Incoherence of the Philosophers]. Translated by Michael E. Marmura. Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2000.
- Aristotle. *The Complete Work of Aristotle*. Edited by Jonathan Barnes. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.
- Averroes. *Faṣl al-maqāl* [Decisive Treatise]. Translated by Charles Butterworth. Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2001.
- Averroes. *Tahāfut al-tahāfut* [The Incoherence of the Incoherence]. Translated by Simon Van den Bergh, 2 vols. Cambridge: E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 1954.
- Berman, Eliezer Zev. "Ibn Bajja and Maimonides." PhD diss., Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1959.
- Braslavy-Klein, Sarah. "The Creation of the World and Maimonides' Interpretation of Gen. I-V." In *Maimonides and Philosophy*, edited by S. Pines and Y. Yovel, 65–78. Springer Netherlands, 1986.
- Braslavy-Klein, Sarah. *Maimonides' Interpretation of the Story of Creation*. Jerusalem: Association for biblical Studies, 1978. [Hebrew]
- Braslavy-Klein, Sarah. "Maimonides's Interpretation of the Verb BRA and the Question of the Creation of the World." *Da'at* 16 (1986): 39–55. [Hebrew]
- Davidson, A. Herbert. "Maimonides' Secret Position on Creation." *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature I* (1979): 16–40.
- Davidson, A. Herbert. "The Problematic Passage in *Guide for the Perplexed* 2:24." *Aleph: History in Science and Judaism* 8 (2008): 163–193.
- Davies, Daniel. "Creation and the Context of Theology and Science in Maimonides and Crescas." In *Creation and the God of Abraham*, edited by David B. Burrell, Carlo Cogliati, Janet M. Soskice, and William R. Steger, 65–76. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Davies, Daniel. *Method and Metaphysics in Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed*. Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Del Valle, Carlos. "La Contradiction Del Hereje De Issac Ben Polgar." In *Jewish Studies at the turn of the Twentieth Century*, edited by Judit Targarona Borrás and Angel Sáenz-Badillos, 552–560. Leiden: Brill, 1999.
- Falaquera, Shem Tov ben Joseph. *Moreh ha-Moreh* [Guide of the Guide]. Edited by Yair Shiffman. Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, The Rabbi David Moses and Amalia Rosen Foundation, 2001.
- Feldman, Seymour. "An Averroist Solution to a Maimonidean Perplexity." *Maimonidean Studies* 4 (2000): 15–31.
- Griffel, Frank. *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Halbertal, Moshe. *Maimonides, Life and Thought*. Princeton University Press, 2014.
- Harvey, Warren Zev. "A Third Approach to Maimonides' Cosmogony-Prophetology Puzzle." *Harvard Theological Review* 74 (1981): 287–301.
- Harvey, Warren Zev. "Maimonides' Critical Epistemology and *Guide* 2:24." *Aleph: History in Science and Judaism* 8 (2008): 213–235.
- Hecht, L. Jonathan. "The Polemical Exchange between Isaac Pollegar and Abner of Burgos/ Alfonso of Valladolid according to Parma MS 2440." PhD diss., New York University, 1993.
- Ivry, L. Alfred. "Maimonides on Creation." *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 9 (1990): 115–137. [Hebrew]
- Jospe, Raphael. *Torah and Sophia: The Life and Thought of Shem Tov Ibn Falquera*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Hebrew Union College Press, 1988.

- Kaplan, J. Lawrence. "Maimonides on the Miraculous Element in Prophecy." *Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 70, No. 3/4 (1977): 233–256.
- Kogan, S. Barry. "The Problem of Creation in Late Medieval Jewish Philosophy." In *A Straight Path: Studies in Medieval Philosophy and Culture; Essays in Honor of Arthur Hyman*, edited by Ruth Link-Salinger, 159–173. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988.
- Kohler, Y. George. *Reading Maimonides' Philosophy in 19th Century Germany, The Guide to the Religious Reform*. Dordrecht; New York: Springer, 2012.
- Kreisel, H. Howard. "Maimonides on the Eternity of the World." *Jewish Philosophy* (2012): 157–184.
- Kreisel, H. Howard. "Maimonides On the Miraculous Element in Prophecy." *Harvard Theological Review* 70 (1977): 233–256.
- Maimonides. *Commentary on the Mishnah*, 3 vols. Translated by Y. Qāfiḥ. Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1976.
- Maimonides. *Dalālat al-ḥā'irīn* [Guide of the Perplexed]. Edited by Shlomo Munk and Issachar Joel, Jerusalem: Junovitch, 1931; Hebrew translation by Samuel ibn Tibbon, edited by Yehuda Even-Shmuel. Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1987; English translation by Shlomo Pines. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963.
- Maimonides. *Mishneh Torah* [The Code of the Torah]. Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1993.
- Manekin, Charles. *On Maimonides*. Wadsworth Philosophers Series, 2005.
- Nuriel, Avraham. "The Question of a Created or Primordial World in the Philosophy of Maimonides." *Tarbiz* 33 (1964): 372–387.
- Pines, Shlomo. "Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* and The Jewish Philosophical Tradition." *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, *Harvard Judaic Texts and Studies* 6 (1987): 499–521.
- Plato. *Complete Works*. Indianapolis&Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.
- Polqar, Isaac. 'Ezer ha-Dat. Edited by Jacob Levinger. Tel-Aviv: Tel-Aviv University, 1984. [Hebrew]
- Polqar, Isaac. *Teshuvat Apikoros/Iggeret ha-Ḥarafot* [A Response to the Heretic]. In "The Polemical Exchange between Isaac Pollegar and Abner of Burgos/ Alfonso of Valladolid according to Parma MS 2440." Hecht, Jonathan L. PhD diss., New York University, 1993.
- Rudavsky, M. Tamar. *Maimonides*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- Seeskin, Kenneth. "Maimonides on Creation." *Jewish Philosophy* (2012): 185–199.
- Seeskin, Kenneth. *Maimonides on the Origin of the World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Vajda, Georges. *Isaac Albalag: Averroïste Juif, Traducteur et Annotateur d' Al-Ghazâlî*. Paris: J. Vrin, 1960.
- Weiss, Roslyn. "Natural Order or Divine Will: Maimonides on Cosmology and Prophecy." *Journal of Jewish Thought & Philosophy*, 15, 1 (2007): 1–26.

Yehuda Halper

The Sex Life of a Metaphysical Sceptic: Platonic Themes in Gersonides' *Commentary* on *Song of Songs*

In his bestselling book *Born to Kvetch*, the popular Yiddishist Michael Wex recounts how, as pupils at a religious *yeshivah*, he and his friends learned of Rashi's explanation of the first reference to breasts in the *Song of Songs* as, in fact, referring to Moses and Aaron, who were responsible for nourishing the Children of Israel in the desert. In his account, the boys then proceeded to notice the "Moses and Aaron" on various women around town and one would expect that they could hardly suppress giggles at any mention of Moses and Aaron in any other context.¹ Rashi's de-eroticization of *Song of Songs* thus had as a side effect that it simultaneously eroticized Moses and Aaron precisely among the impressionable youth whom he had intended to shield. De-eroticization is a tricky business; comparison of the erotic to the non-erotic tends rather to eroticize the non-erotic. Whether Rashi was aware of this effect I leave to the scholars of that pious man of Troyes.

Gersonides, however, who lived 200 years after Rashi and much further South, was certainly aware of how *eros* can spread from the allegory to the allegorized. Gersonides explains that the expressions of love between the interlocutors of the *Song of Songs* are allegories of the soul's path to intellectual perfection, a path that moves from ethical perfection, to the perfection of imagination and thought, to mathematics, to the physical sciences, and, finally, to metaphysics.² Far from removing *eros* from the picture, Gersonides uses *Song of Songs*' highly erotic language to describe the desire of the soul, its faculties, and even the *hylic* intellect for the active intellect. These desires are described not only as *teshuqah* (desire), but especially by the term *hesheq*, which refers to an erotic desire, particularly in the context of the *Song of Songs*.³ Realization of such desires leads to pleasure (*ta'anug*), joy (*simḥah*), embraces

1 Michael Wex, *Born to Kvetch: Yiddish Language and Culture in All of Its Moods* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 88–90.

2 A critical edition of Gersonides' *Commentary on Song of Songs* appeared as Rabbi Levi ben Gershom, *Commentary on Song of Songs* [Heb.], ed. Menachem Kellner (Ramat Gan, Israel: Bar Ilan University Press, 2003). An English translation was published as Levi ben Gershom, *Commentary on Song of Songs*, trans. Menachem Kellner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). Quotations from the *Commentary* will list the Hebrew edition first, followed by the English translation.

3 Note, however, that the term *hesheq* does not appear in the *Song of Songs* itself. Yet it was also associated with the *Song of Songs* by Gersonides' contemporary Baḥya ben Asher, who distinguishes between 'ahabah and *hesheq*, explicitly connecting the latter with intellectual conjunction or conjunction of thought (*debequt hamahshabah*). See his *Kad Haqemah*, in *Kitve Rabbenu Baḥya*, ed. Charles B. Chavel (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1969), 34–35. Another of Gersonides' contemporaries,

(*teḥabqeni*), and, of course, kisses (*neshiqot*). But the characters in the *Song of Songs* do not go “all the way,” and the erotic desires both in the *Song of Songs* and in Gersonides’ characterization remain unconsummated.

In a sense, Gersonides’ *Song of Songs* commentary resembles Diotima’s account of *eros* in Plato’s *Symposium*. Both describe a love of that which the lover does not possess, i.e., for Gersonides, an *eros* of the soul and the *hylic* intellect for the active intellect. Moreover, like Diotima’s *eros*, Gersonides’ *hesheq* is all-consuming, as all of the faculties of the soul subject themselves to it and the entire *hesheq* (“desirer”) is consumed by the desire. This subjugation of the powers of the soul to this final desire is akin to Diotima’s description of the so-called Ladder of Love in the *Symposium*. According to Diotima, the path to *eros* of the beautiful begins with the young person’s desire for beautiful bodies, continues with the abstraction of that love to the *eros* for beautiful souls, and from there to the love of the sciences, and then to the love of beauty itself, i.e., the form of beauty.⁴

Joseph Kaspi, also says that the primary meaning of the Song of Songs is in uncovering the relationship between *hesheq* and cognition of the intelligibles. See his short commentary on Song of Songs in *Mikra’ot Gedolot ‘HaKeter’: The Five Scrolls*, ed. Menachem Cohen (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2012), p. 28 [Hebrew pagination]. Gersonides also uses the term *hesheq* to refer to desire for higher knowledge, which is a knowledge that is similarly accompanied by pleasure, though it reaches its height only after one’s death, in *Wars of the Lord*, (Leipzig: Lorck, 1866), 90. See also Seymour Feldman’s translation, vol. 1, (Philadelphia: JPS, 1984), 225. These uses of *hesheq* to refer to erotic love probably derive, at least to some extent, from Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s use of the term to translate the Arabic term for erotic, passionate love, ‘*ishq*, in Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed* III 51. On the background of Maimonides’ use of this term, see Steven Harvey, “Avicenna and Maimonides on Prayer and Intellectual Worship,” in *Exchange and Transmission across Cultural Boundaries: Philosophy, Mysticism and Science in the Mediterranean World*, ed. Haggai Ben-Shammai (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 2013): 82–105. See also, Steven Harvey, “The Meaning of Terms Designating Love in Judaeo-Arabic Thought and Some Remarks on the Judaeo-Arabic Interpretation of Maimonides,” in *Studies in Muslim-Jewish Relations III*, ed. Norman Golb. (Reading, UK: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996): 175–196.

The term *hesheq* also appears in Shem Tob ibn Falaquera’s translation/summary of Al-Fārābī’s *Philosophy of Plato*, in *Reshit Hokhmah*, ed. Mortiz David (Berlin: 1902), 74–75. Al-Fārābī’s Arabic term with which Falaquera is translating *hesheq* is ‘*ishq*’ (see Alfarabius, *De Platonis Philosophia*, ed. Franz Rosenthal and Richard Walzer [London: Warburg Institute, 1943]: 14–15 of the Arabic pages). Al-Fārābī is characterizing Socrates’ discussion in Plato’s *Phaedrus* and the underlying Greek term is almost certainly ἔρως. A similar use of the term *hesheq* is also attributed to Plato in Judah Al-Ḥarizi, *Mussare Hafilosofim*, (ed. A. Loewenthal [Frankfurt am Main: Kaufmann, 1895]: 15. There Plato is said to compare the *hesheq* of one soul for another to the *hesheq* of one body for another. This work is a translation of Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq’s *ʿādāb al-falāsifah*, but unfortunately this passage in Hebrew is among several chapters not found in the Arabic. See Abdurrahman Badawi’s edition of the Arabic text (Kuwait: l’Institut des Manuscrits Arabes, 1985), 61–62, which is missing text corresponding to Chapters 18–20 of the Hebrew edition. Accordingly, we cannot know if the underlying Arabic term is also ‘*ishq*’.

⁴ See Plato, *Symposium*, 210a–212b.

For Gersonides, the text operates on various layers: there is, of course, the text of the *Song* itself, with its descriptions of erotic desires for bodies. Then, there is the understanding of this as an allegory referring to the soul. Thus he differentiates between the allegory itself (*hamashal*) and that to which the allegory refers (*hanimshal*). The reader who understands that this is an allegory understands that there is a “hidden meaning” (*hanistar*) and can search for the allegory.⁵ This allegory concerns the sciences, which culminate in a metaphysical approach to the active intellect.⁶ The similarities between this progression from the plain text to approaching the active intellect and Diotima’s Ladder of Love in the *Symposium* are, I think, quite clear. Most significantly, at each stage of this progression we find a new understanding of the object of the *hesheq*. That is to say, *eros* is present at every stage of the interpretation, though its object and direction change throughout. The process of studying science leads the desirer from the most open kind of desire and the most easily identifiable to the most concealed desire, the desire for the active intellect, which is also the most difficult, if not impossible to grasp.

Gersonides’ use of “concealed” (*nistar*) to refer to what is allegorized suggests that the plain meaning of the text is “revealed” (*nigleh*). Moreover, Gersonides’ statement that the *secrets* ought to be kept hidden “from those who are not fit for them”⁷ implies that the *revealed* meaning of the text need not be kept hidden from the many. Gersonides is thus distinguished from how most other medieval and rabbinic interpreters of *Song of Songs* are usually understood. Other interpreters, in

5 One place Gersonides delineates these distinctions is on 66–67 / 13–14: “You must not fail to note that some of the attributes with which the lovers described each other relate both to the allegory (*hamashal*) and to its intended meaning (*hanimshal*) [...] This was done in order to indicate the hidden meaning (*hanistar*), so that one would not mistakenly think that the statements in this book should be taken according to their external sense (*hanigleh*).”

6 See, e.g., 66–68 / 13–15. Menachem Kellner compares the approach to the active intellect through the sciences in the *Commentary on Song of Songs* with some of Gersonides’ other works in “Gersonides on Imitatio Dei and the Dissemination of Scientific Knowledge,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 85 (1995): 275–296. In his introduction to the Hebrew edition (24 following), Kellner argues convincingly that the intended reader of Gersonides’ *Commentary* is a beginning student. Accordingly, the *Commentary* is designed to encourage the student to undertake an orderly study of science in order to reach knowledge of the highest things. These arguments are expanded in Menachem Kellner, *Torah in the Observatory: Gersonides, Maimonides, Song of Songs* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2010), 121–148 and 159–179. Kellner, however, discounts the importance of metaphysics for Gersonides on the grounds that “in practice [metaphysical] study is both difficult and dangerous and in an important sense it is unnecessary: one can achieve felicity without it” (p. 166). Accordingly, Kellner does not see Gersonides as a metaphysical sceptic, but as one who prefers physics and astronomy to metaphysics as a less difficult, less dangerous approach to reaching the acquired intellect.

7 העלם ממי שאינו ראוי להם, 67 / 14. In context, it is clear that העלם refers to the author’s actively hiding the secrets; for example, the expression, יוסיף העלם בדבריו, which appears in the same paragraph cannot possibly mean that the meaning has merely escaped the notice of the reader, but that the author has actively suppressed the meaning.

fact, are understood as seeing the plain text as what ought to be hidden and are only willing to discuss openly the allegorical meanings. Indeed, Gersonides claims to be espousing the author's intention in the *Song of Songs*⁸ and, accordingly, is astonishingly open to the plain meaning of the text.⁹ To be sure, Gersonides notes "that which is revealed is not beneficial to the many,"¹⁰ but this seems to be because it eroticizes bodies, which the many already do. It is only the singular individuals whom the *Song* truly guides to happiness.¹¹ Yet it is possible that there are people who are neither among the many nor among the singular individuals who benefit in varying degrees from the *Song*. Thus, Gersonides refers to the author's "desire that his words be both understood according to the ability of those fit to understand them and kept hidden from the masses."¹² That is, the true meaning is hidden from the masses (who presumably cannot eroticize anything besides bodies), but aims at a range of people among the elite with a spectrum of intellectual abilities. Only a few will understand the allegory in all of its depth, while the others will have the open meaning of the text and perhaps some layers of allegory. That is, all readers of the *Song of Songs* will understand its erotic nature, but only some will be able to benefit from that eroticism by applying it to intellectual endeavours.¹³ This kind of relation

8 מה שכוון בהם 51 / 3.

9 In contrast, Abraham Ibn Ezra, for example, maintains adamantly, "heaven forfend, heaven forfend that Song of Songs be like words of *hesheq*, except as an allegory!" (חלילה חלילה להיות שיר השירים) (כדברי חשק כי אם על דרך משל), in *Mikra'ot Gedolot 'HaKeter'*, p. 22 [Hebrew pagination].

10 לא הושם נגלהו מועיל להמון 61 (compare to Kellner's translation, 8).

11 Ibid. ואולם זה הספר, והוא שיר השירים, הוא מישר היחידים לבד אל דרך הגעת ההצלחה.

12 רצותו שיובנו דבריו כפי היכולת למי שראוי שיבינם עם העלם מן ההמון כמו שהוא מחוייב 68 / 15. On the meaning of *binah*, the root word for ישיבנם, "to understand them," as inferences or "propositions derived inductively," see Sara Klein-Braslavy, "Dialectic in Gersonides' Commentary on Proverbs," in Sara Klein-Braslavy, "Without Any Doubt": *Gersonides on Method and Knowledge* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), 88–89 and 96–110. According to Klein-Braslavy, the term *tebunah*, from the same root as *binah*, refers especially to what she calls the "diaporematic method." The reading of Gersonides' *Commentary on Song of Songs* that I present in this article is not incompatible with Klein-Braslavy's notion of dialectic and diaporematic methods when it comes to metaphysics, though perhaps not physics.

13 One sentence in the book is sometimes adduced to show that Gersonides rejected the plain meaning of the text: "It is not characteristic of those who speak by virtue of the holy spirit to write poems crafted so as to attract one to despicable behaviour or to write poems of vanity and falsehood which do not attract one to the things which ought to be loved or to the rejection of things which ought to be rejected" (כי אין מחוק המזבירים ברוח הקדש לדבר שירים אשר יתוקנו להמשך האדם אל הפעולות המגונות, ולא בשירי) (ההבלים והכזבים אשר לא ימשיכו האדם אל הדברים שראוי שיאהבו או אל הרחקת הדברים אשר ראוי שירחוקו) (69 / 17). However, this sentence does not actually deny validity to the plain meaning of the text, which need not be seen as attracting anyone to "despicable behaviour" or attracting one to things that ought to be rejected. Indeed, the above sentence is not complete, but begins, "There is no doubt that all of them [sc. all of Solomon's songs] guided one toward the perfection intended for man, whether to the first perfection or to the ultimate perfection, or to them both together" (ואין ספק שכלם היו מישרים אל השלימות) (המכוון באדם, אם אל השלימות הראשון ואם לשלימות האחרון אם אל שניהם יחד). If marriage and procreation are perfections of man, then there should be no reason not to understand the *Song of Songs* as supporting

between the surface meaning of the text and the hidden allegorization of the text to *eros* reminds us moderns of Diotima's Ladder, which begins from the eroticism that all see in bodies and ascends to the erotic contemplation of the form of Beauty by the few.¹⁴

II. The Erotic Path to God

Gersonides thus rejects all previous interpretations of *Song of Songs*. He is particularly critical of the Midrash, which he says is "the opposite of what was intended by the author."¹⁵ The Midrash, according to Gersonides had its own aims that were, in fact, external to the text, and if mentioned in connection with the proper interpretation could only lead to misunderstanding the text, in some cases so much so that it would bring "the reader to despise the words of the author."¹⁶ Gersonides expresses the hope that he will live long enough to comment on the midrashic interpretations in a separate work¹⁷ – he did not, unfortunately – and clearly implies that the Midrash and the text are at odds. Gersonides thus presents himself as a textual purist – a somewhat surprising image in light of his many citations of and even quotations from philosophical works.

Aside from references to other biblical works, his own works, especially *Wars of the Lord*, a few references to Talmudic literature (only one of which is directly connected to the Song of Songs), and two references to Maimonides, Gersonides does not refer to Jewish texts or other commentaries on Song of Songs. He does, however, refer to a large number of Aristotelian texts, including *Analytica Posteriora*, *Topica*,

them. In any case, I do not see how this sentence can be seen as an *ipso facto* rejection of the plain sense of the Song, especially in light of Gersonides' very frequent discussions of it.

14 Gersonides offers a different approach to the erotic ascent to intellectual knowledge in his Commentary on Ecclesiastes. There, after defining wisdom (חכמה) as "knowing the existing thing insofar as it is an existing thing – and this is First Philosophy," i.e., metaphysics, Gersonides says, "seeking wisdom is very much desired" (ענין בקשת החכמה הוא חשוק מאד). That is, metaphysics is an object of *hesheq*. However, Gersonides continues by recommending that one wishing to attain such wisdom should "distance himself from that one lesser thing which the ignoramus longs for, namely woman. For she is 'snares and nets' (cf. Ecclesiastes 7:26) so as to entrap a man's heart in such a way that she prevents him from any perfection of soul" (והוא האשה, אשר) (היא "מצודים וחרמים" ללכוד לב האדם, באופן שתמנע אותו מכל שלמות נפשי שיתרחק מדבר אחד פחות, יכסוף אותו הסכל, והוא האשה, אשר). See Levi ben Gershom, *Perushe hammegillot* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 2003), 48 and 52 (see also 53). This approach does not appear to be reconcilable with the approach we find in the *Commentary on Song of Songs*. I leave to future studies the task of reconciling these positions.

15 מהלך הדרש [...] שנאמר בו בדברים חלוף מה שכונ בהם 51 / 3.

16 הביאורים דברי הדרושים ההם [...] אם שיבלבל המעיין מהבין מה שכונ בדברים [...] אם שהיו סבה אל מה שיקוץ 51 / 3. בדברי המחבר

17 52 / 4.

Physica, Meteorologica, De Anima, Parva Naturalia, De Animalibus, and *Metaphysica*. He also refers several times to Ptolemy's *Almagest*. Indeed, Gersonides explicitly avoids Rabbinic interpretations of *Song of Songs* and turns instead to Aristotle and Ptolemy. He justifies this turn with the following statement¹⁸:

We shall begin by laying down the following premise, which encompasses everything included in this book. It is evident from the perspective of the Torah and the prophets and from the perspective of theorization that man's ultimate happiness resides in intellectually cognizing and knowing God to the extent that is possible for him. This will be perfected through contemplation of the *intentiones* of existing things, their order, their equilibrium, and the manner of God's wisdom in organizing them as they are. This is so because these intelligibles direct one to knowledge of God to some extent, for an activity gives some indication concerning its agent; that is, absolutely perfect activity indicates that its agent is absolutely perfect, insofar as it is an agent.

ומהנה נתחיל בהצעה אחת מקפת בכל מה שיכלליה זה הספר, והיא זאת: מבואר נגלה מצד התורה והנביאים ומצד העיון, שההצלחה התכליתית לאדם היא כשישכיל וידע הש"י כפי מה שאפשר לו. וזה אמנם ישלם כשיתבונן בענייני הנמצאות וסדרם ויושרם ואופן חכמת השם בשומם אותם על מה שהם עליו. וזה שאילו המושכלות יישירו אל הידיעה בשם ית' באופן מה, כי הפעולה מורה על הפועל הוראה מה; רוצה לומר כי הפעולה השלמה אשר בתכלית תורה על פועל שלם בתכלית מצד שהוא פועל.

Gersonides' argument here is the gist of his approach to science throughout the *Commentary*: science studies the existing things which, because they are activities, indicate their Agent. Moreover, such a scientific quest for the divine is mandated by the Torah and prophets and, in fact, leads to human happiness (*haṣlaḥah*). What Gersonides has in mind by "the Torah and the prophets" here is not entirely clear, but the passage itself seems to be based on the opening of Averroes' *Decisive Treatise*. The following is the relevant statement from the *Decisive Treatise* in an anonymous medieval Hebrew translation whose terminology is close to Gersonides' and quite possibly the latter's source¹⁹:

¹⁸ 52–53 / 4, translation modified.

¹⁹ The anonymous Hebrew translation is published in Norman Golb, "Hebrew Translation of Averroes' *Faṣl al-Maqāl*." *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 25 (1956): 91–113. The passage in question is on 97. If this is, indeed, Gersonides' source, then June, 1325, the date of composition of Gersonides' *Commentary on Song of Songs*, is a *terminus ante quem* for this translation of the *Decisive Treatise*.

We say: if the activity of philosophy is nothing more than theorization about and consideration of existing things insofar as they are an indication of the Agent, i.e., insofar as they have been activated – for existing things indicate their Agent through knowing the art in them, and the more perfect the knowledge of the art in them is, the more perfect is the knowledge of the Agent – and if the Law has recommended and urged consideration of the existing things, then it is evident what this name indicates is either obligatory or recommended by the Law.²⁰

ונאמר אם היה פעל הפילוסופיה אינו דבר יותר מהעיון בנמצאות ובחינתם מצד הוראתם על הפועל²¹ רצו' מצד שהם פעולים כי הנמצאות יורו על הפועל בדיעת מלאכתם ושהוא כל עת היות הידיעה במלאכתם יותר שלמה היתה הידיעה בפועל יותר שלמה והיתה התורה כבר הביאה אל בחינת הנמצאות ומהרה בזה הנה מבואר שמה שזורה על זה השם אם מחויב בתורה אם מובא אליו.

Gersonides' approach to the *Song of Songs*, then is based not on Rabbinic texts, but, it seems, on Averroes. According to both, philosophy ought to be taken up to study existing things with a view to knowing God. Now, the study of existing things with a view to knowing God is, of course, metaphysics. Gersonides thus places metaphysics front and centre in his *Commentary on Song of Songs*.

Gersonides' formulation though differs from Averroes' in several respects and these distinctions are indications of larger differences in their approach to metaphysics. First, Averroes says, "existing things indicate their Agent through knowing the art in them," leaving it ambiguous as to whether substantive knowledge of God can actually be obtained. Gersonides' statement that the "intelligibles direct one to

²⁰ My translation has been aided by Charles Butterworth's translation of this passage in Averroes, *Decisive Treatise and Epistle Dedicatory*, trans. Charles Butterworth (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2001), 1–2.

²¹ One of the idiosyncrasies of this translation is the use of "agent" (פועל) to refer to God, where Averroes had Artisan (صانع). Falaquera essentially quotes the same lines in his *Epistle of the Debate*, though his terminology favours "creator" (בורא) and "creation" (בריאה). We should also note that Falaquera cites Exodus 33:13 as the proof that this position is in fact found in the Torah. See Steven Harvey, *Falaquera's Epistle of the Debate: An Introduction to Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 73, compare also 40. Steven Harvey compares Falaquera's approach to this line with Averroes' in more detail in "The Quiddity of Philosophy According to Averroes and Falaquera, a Muslim Philosopher and his Jewish Interpreter," *Miscellanea Mediaevalia* 26 (2012): 904–913. According to Harvey, Falaquera "cautions that the philosophers themselves have many doubts about metaphysics and concede that much is beyond man's capacity to understand." Moreover, Falaquera's "concern seems to have been with those areas in metaphysics where Aristotle's teachings seem to contradict the Torah" (912). Could Falaquera's use of בורא rather than יוצר or אומן to translate صانع be in deference to the religious connotations of בורא? That is, could Falaquera be signalling that metaphysics is permissible for some so long as God is viewed as the בורא, i.e., so long as the metaphysician adopts a fundamentally religious viewpoint and assumes that God exists and created the world? If so then the kind of metaphysical scepticism I am arguing that Gersonides associates with this view (see esp. next paragraph and n. 22 below) are fundamentally at odds with Falaquera's views of philosophy.

knowledge of God *to some extent*” is less ambiguous, implying that this knowledge is not complete. Further, Averroes’ statement, “the more perfect the knowledge of the art in them is, the more perfect is the knowledge of the Agent” implies that perfect knowledge of the Agent may be a possibility, if a remote one. Gersonides’ statement, “absolutely perfect activity indicates that its Agent is absolutely perfect,” suggests only that the one who masters knowledge of existing things and their activity knows only *that* God is perfect. It says nothing about any substantial, or even accidental knowledge of God. Most significant here, though, is that Gersonides describes man’s highest intellectual achievement and that by which he knows as much about God as he can as knowing “existing things, their order, their equilibrium, and the manner of God’s wisdom in organizing them as they are.” Man, then, in Gersonides’ view, does not attain much knowledge of God, but only what can be gained from understanding the world.²²

III. The Desire to Know

This is not the only reference to Averroes in the *Commentary on Song of Songs*. In fact, as far as I can tell, *all* of the references to Aristotle are actually to Averroes’ commentaries on Aristotle. Moreover, echoes of Averroes’ words can be felt throughout the *Commentary*. Indeed, it seems possible to me that Gersonides engages in a nearly constant dialogue with Averroes in this *Commentary*. This dialogue with Averroes, to some extent, can be seen as a development of the deeper engagement with Averroes’ commentaries that Gersonides made in his own super-commentaries on Averroes’ commentaries. Between 1321 and around 1324, i.e., until just before writing the *Commentary on Song of Songs*, Gersonides wrote at least 17 commentaries on Aristotelian works, i.e., on Averroes’ Short and Middle Commentaries on those works. These commentaries focused on logic and natural science and, while most of them still await full scholarly attention, it is clear that they reflect a high level of engagement with Averroes’ works. They analyse his words, develop arguments for them, adduce additional evidence, and not infrequently argue against Averroes. At the time when he began writing his Bible commentaries, his Aristotelian commentary project, if it was not still continuing, was certainly fresh in his mind; we should not be surprised to see frequent references and allusions to Averroes.²³

²² Gersonides presents a similar position in *Wars of the Lord*, Part 1, Chapter 12. Moreover, in his introduction to *Wars*, Gersonides explicitly repudiates deriving fundamental principles from the essence of the First Cause, “for our knowledge of the essence of the First Cause is very slight” (Feldman trans., 92; Leipzig, 2).

²³ On the chronology of Gersonides’ writings, see Ruth Glasner, *Gersonides: A Portrait of a Fourteenth-Century Philosopher-Scientist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 13–18. Glasner explores

Here I shall mention one important instance where Gersonides is apparently in dialogue with Averroes' *Long Commentary* on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* – this will be treated separately from the possibility that Gersonides may have written an incomplete super-commentary on Averroes' *Middle Commentary* on the *Metaphysics*.²⁴ This will give a snapshot rather than a full picture of Gersonides' relation to Averroes in his *Commentary on Song of Songs*, but a snapshot that is nonetheless revealing of Gersonides' erotic approach to metaphysics. Gersonides explicitly refers to Book I of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* in his explanation of *Song of Songs* I 2²⁵:

[The author] explained that God placed in our nature, we the community of human beings, a stronger desire to know the *intentiones* of existing things than our desire for bodily pleasures. This premise is true; there is no doubt about its truth. The Philosopher has explained this in the first book of the *Metaphysics* in the new translation. Solomon presented a wonderful explanation for this; it is that every man, *ab initio*, can see God's wisdom and greatness in created things by virtue of the perfection found in their creation. From this perspective, every man has a wonderful *hesheq* to know the goodness of the order and the equilibrium found among created things, all of which wonderfully indicate the perfection of the Agent, as stated above.

ובאר תחילה שה' ית' שם בטבע בנו, עדת האנשים, תשוקה לדעת²⁶ ענייני הנמצאות, יותר חזקה מתשוקתנו אל ההנאות הגופיות. וזאת ההקדמה אמיתית, אין ספק באמתתה. וכבר באר אותה הפלוסוף בראשון ממה שאחר הטבע מההעתקה החדשה. והנה שלמה נתן בזה סבה נפלאה, והיא הראות חכמת ה' וגדולתו בנבראות לכל אדם בתחילת העניין מצד השלימות הנמצא בבריאתם. ומוזה הצד יהיה חשק כל אדם נפלא לדעת טוב הסדור והיושר אשר בנמצאות, אשר יורה הוראה נפלאה על שלימות הפועל, כמו שקדם.

Gersonides here claims to be drawing on Book I of the *Metaphysics* in a “new” translation. Which new translation does he have in mind? It is not likely that Gersonides would call William of Moerbeke's translation “new” in 1325, more than fifty years after it was composed, nor would Gersonides fail to mention in this context that that

the issues of chronology in more detail in “The Evolution of the Genre of the Commentary in Gersonides” [Heb.], *DAAT: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah* 74–75 (2013): 185–196.

²⁴ See Ruth Glasner, “Gersonides' Lost Commentary On the *Metaphysics*,” *Medieval Encounters* 4 (1998): 130–157. See also Glasner, *Gersonides*: 71–79. Glasner attributes to Gersonides doubts about metaphysical methods and the Aristotelian scientific method. Moreover, according to Glasner, Gersonides interprets the Biblical figure of Solomon as representative of his new way of doing science. Glasner's position is not necessarily incompatible with my position in this paper. My conclusions about Gersonides' view of metaphysics here are confined to what can be inferred from his *Commentary on Song of Songs*.

²⁵ Gersonides, *Commentary on Song of Songs*, 72–73 / 20, translation modified.

²⁶ On the connection of knowledge (*da 'at*), dialectic syllogisms, and intelligibles, see Sara Klein-Braslavsky, “Dialectic in Gersonides' Commentary on Proverbs,” 81–84.

translation was not into Hebrew. Nor can he be referring to the Hebrew translation of the *Metaphysics*, since that text, like its Arabic source, takes *Metaphysics* α ἔλκττον to be Book I, and accordingly makes no mention of the desire to know which appears in the famous opening line of Α μεῖζον. In fact, the first four and a half chapters of *Metaphysics* Α μεῖζον did not make it into the Arabic text and consequently the desire to know does not figure in to the Arabic text of *Metaphysics* Α μεῖζον or any Hebrew translations of that text.²⁷ Averroes' Middle or Short Commentaries on the *Metaphysics*, which build off of the text of the *Metaphysics* that Averroes had, also do not mention the desire to know in their first Books.²⁸ The only Hebrew Aristotelian text that I am aware of that mentions this desire to know prominently in Book I is Averroes' *Long Commentary* on *Metaphysics* α ἔλκττον, which Gersonides is known to cite elsewhere.²⁹ The Hebrew translation of this text would have been quite new in 1325 and Gersonides would have been among its first readers.³⁰ We should not be too troubled by Gersonides' saying "the Philosopher" when he is in fact drawing on Averroes, since he, like other medievals, was not always careful to distinguish between Aristotle and Averroes.

Averroes mentions the desire to know in his introductory comments to what in the *Long Commentary* on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is taken to be the opening line of the *Metaphysics*: "The investigation of truth is in one sense difficult, in another easy."³¹ Averroes, in the anonymous Hebrew translation which was probably what Gersonides read, interprets this line as follows³²:

²⁷ See Averroes, *Tafsir ma ba'd at-tabi'ah*, ed. Maurice Bouyges (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1938–1942), vol. 1. The absence of these chapters was apparently not known to Kellner, see 73, n. 21 of Hebrew edition.

²⁸ Although no satisfactory edition of Averroes' *Short Commentary* on the *Metaphysics* is extant, there is a recent English translation in *On Aristotle's "Metaphysics": An Annotated Translation of the So-called "Epitome,"* trans. Rüdinger Arnzen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010). Averroes' *Middle Commentary* on the *Metaphysics*, which survives only in Hebrew translations, was critically edited in *Il Commento medio di Averroè alla Metafisica di Aristotele nella tradizione ebraica: Edizione delle versioni ebraiche medievali di Zerahyah Hen e di Qalonymos ben Qalonymos con introduzione storica e filologica*, ed. Mauro Zonta (Pavia: Pavia University Press, 2011), see vol. II/1.

²⁹ Charles Touati refers to one such citation in the *Wars of the Lord*, see *La Pensée Philosophique et Théologique de Gersonide* (Paris: Minuit, 1973), 40.

³⁰ On dating the first, anonymous, Hebrew translation of Averroes' *Long Commentary* on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, see Yehuda Halper, "Revision and Standardization of Hebrew Philosophical Terminology in the Fourteenth Century: The Example of Averroes' *Long Commentary* on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Δ and the Development of Hebrew Scientific Terms." *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism* 13 (2013): 99–100.

³¹ In our texts this appears at *Metaphysics* 993a30–31, in Book α ἔλκττον, i.e., Book II.

³² The Hebrew text is from Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF) heb. MS 886, f. 1r. For the translation, I also examined the revised translation of Moses ben Solomon of Salon, found in BNF ms. 887, as well as the Arabic edition, ed. Bouyges, vol 1, 5.

Since this science [viz. metaphysics] is that which examines truth absolutely, he undertook to make known the path which reaches it through difficulty and ease. For it is known in itself by all that there is here a path that brings us to the truth and that grasping the truth is not impossible for us in most things. The proof of this is that we think true thoughts that we hold in truth about many things. This conclusion has been reached by those who have trained themselves in the sciences of certainty.³³

Another proof of this is also that we have a desire for knowledge of the truth. For if attaining the truth were not possible, this desire would be vain – and it is known that there is nothing at the root of formation and creation that is vain. [...]

As for the proof of its difficulty, nobody can be found who has reached it without sharing in its examination with others in a necessary measure. Yet, as for its ease, the proof is that it does not escape all men. [...] Yet we see that it is difficult and we do not decide to refrain from it on account of the length of time needed to hold it in truth.

בעבור שהיתה זאת החכמה היא אשר תחקור מהאמת בשלוח, לקח להודיע ענין הדרך הנמנעת אליו בקושי והקלות, כי היה מהידוע בעצמו אצל הכל שהנה דרך יגיענו אל האמת ושהשגת האמת לא תמנע עלינו ברוב הדברים. והראיה על זה שאנחנו נסבור סברא אמיתית שאנחנו כבר עמדנו על האמת בהרבה מהדברים. וזה תפול בו למי שהרגיל ידיעות האמת.

ומהראיה גם כן על זה מה שאנחנו עליו מהתשוקה על ידיעת האמת, כי לו היתה השגת האמת נמנעת היתה התשוקה בטלה. ומהידוע בו שאין הנה דבר יהיה בשורש היצירה והבריאה והוא בטל. [...]

והראיה אם על קושי כי לא ימצא אחד מהאנשים הגיע ממנו בלתי שתוף זולתו לו בחקירה אל השעור המחוייב בזה. ואולם על קלותו הנה הראיה עליו שלא יסור מהאנשים כלם [...] אבל אנחנו נראה שהוא קשה ולא נשפוט בהמנע בעבור אורך הזמן המצטרף אל העמידה בו על האמת.

Averroes' statement here that "we have a desire for knowledge of the truth" is essentially equivalent to Aristotle's opening line of *Metaphysics A*, which was unfortunately lost to Averroes: All men by nature desire to know. In addition to the desire to know, Averroes mentions three other key elements that then recur in Gersonides' *Commentary*. These are (1) Most people correctly think that they have obtained some measure of truth; (2) Students of the sciences, especially of metaphysics, require a shared body of knowledge for advancement; and (3) It takes a very long time to attain truth. In the sections I have omitted, Averroes elaborates on these points, and then compares the soul's examination of truth to a blind bat's gazing upon the sun, i.e., a task that cannot be performed fully, though some light might slip even into a bat's eyes.

³³ I take this expression, which I am translating "sciences of certainty" (ידיעות האמת), to refer to logic and the organon that indicates how to produce certainty. It is possible it refers simply to "certain sciences" or even "certain knowledge."

Gersonides, it seems, draws on Averroes' account of the desire to know, yet he modifies that desire to know the "truth" to refer to the desire to know existing things. He then goes on to connect the knowledge of these existing things and their *intentiones* to sensory perception, especially sight and hearing, possibly building off of Aristotle's bat analogy.³⁴ More significantly, Gersonides connects understanding existing things to seeing God's wisdom. This may draw on Averroes' reference to the desire to know the truth, whose Arabic, *التشوق الى معرفة الحق*,³⁵ could also refer to a desire to know God. Gersonides may also be drawing here on the description of the turn to metaphysics he gave at the beginning of his introduction – a description that we saw was probably taken from Averroes' *Decisive Treatise*.

Gersonides goes on to temper this description of the desire for knowledge by acknowledging that not everyone, in fact, desires "to know the *intentiones* of existing things" more than "bodily pleasures." Rather, "some or most [people] do not go beyond the preliminaries and thus abandon the matter and remain with the desire only."³⁶ Yet he also strengthens the description of this desire (*teshuqah*) by using it as part of an explanation for what he described as a *hesheq* for knowing "the goodness of the order and the equilibrium found among existing things."³⁷ According to Gersonides, it is this *hesheq* that the *Song of Songs* seeks to cultivate in order to direct it to true knowledge. That is, the *Song of Songs* seeks in a sense to aid the desire for knowledge, naturally present in all human beings, to gain what it can to progress towards studying metaphysics.

Immediately after his discussion of desire and *hesheq* in connection with the opening of the *Metaphysics*, Gersonides turns to the shared knowledge that was the second point I enumerated in Averroes' introduction to Aristotle's *Metaphysics* above. Gersonides says, "Solomon mentioned another instrument [i.e., besides desire] which God gave us to direct us to our happiness: perfect individuals who exist in every generation and who direct others to perfection, either in speech or in writing, through a natural *hesheq* that they have for this."³⁸ These perfect individuals are essentially teachers; Gersonides says teaching is a kind of *imitatio Dei* since teachers, in his view, derive no benefit from their activities.³⁹ These perfect teachers remove the obstacles

³⁴ Cf. Gersonides, 73 / 21.

³⁵ Bouyges, vol. 1, 5.

³⁶ 74 / 21. See also Kellner's notes ad loc.

³⁷ 73 / 20, translation modified.

³⁸ והנה זכר עוד שלמה בכאן כלי אחר נתן אלינו ה' ית' להישירנו אל הצלחתינו, והם השלמים אשר ימצאו בכל דור דור, 75 / 22. Translation is my own.

³⁹ The passage in the previous note continues: כאלו היה זה מן הטבע להדמות אל ה' ית' כפי היכולת אשר שפע. ממנו זה המציאות השלם, לא להגיעו לו ית' שום תועלת God in accordance with the possibility that this perfect existence emanates from Him without bringing Him, may he be exalted, any benefit. An anonymous review points out that this view is similar to that of Maimonides in *Guide of the Perplexed* II 37: "For the measure of the overflow [...] is either such

preventing the realization of the desire for knowledge. They can make known the ends of knowledge and otherwise direct the desirers to ends that they may not be aware of. They also direct the desirer away from bodily desires and towards intellectual desires. The perfect also point out to the students the way or path towards perfection and give them the benefit of their accumulated apprehensions. The communication of these apprehensions is particularly helpful since it reduces the great length of time needed for doing science.⁴⁰ Thus, the presence of the perfect teachers actually addresses two points of Averroes' introduction to the *Metaphysics*: they provide a shared body of knowledge as well as direction to that knowledge, thereby reducing the amount of time needed for doing science.

Gersonides clearly sees Solomon as being just such an individual, sharing his knowledge of the path to human happiness with the readers of the *Song of Songs*. As we have seen repeatedly, Solomon, according to Gersonides, directs his desires towards the desire for the active intellect. Yet Gersonides himself, as a commentator on *Song of Songs*, must also be among such teachers. Indeed, not only does Gersonides direct his readers towards the highest desires, he also provides them with a wealth of information about his own discoveries and those of other philosophers up to his time. Gersonides, himself, meets the criteria to be a perfect teacher *par excellence*.

Gersonides does not treat Aristotle's and Averroes' first point, that most people correctly think they know something, until he reaches what he considers the sixth and final section of the *Song of Songs*, the one treating metaphysics. There he notes that metaphysics builds off of "generally accepted premises" (*haqdamot mefurse-mot*)⁴¹ and enjoins his readers not to examine these until they have a good foundation

as only to render the individual who receives it perfect and to have no other effect, or such that from that individual's perfection there is something left over that suffices to make others perfect" (Shlomo Pines translation [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963], 374–375). According to this account, the teacher or prophet has a kind of overflow that may be in some way similar to the divine overflow.

⁴⁰ Gersonides says, "Our perfect predecessors guide us in speculation in a way which brings us to perfection, through either their speech or writing, by virtue of the natural *hesheq* they have for proffering this emanation, and will make known to us concerning each thing the way in which it should be researched and what they have understood concerning it, together with the assistance concerning it which they have derived from their predecessors. And that for which we need sensual apprehensions which can be accomplished only with difficulty and over a long time, surpassing the span of a human life, will also be completed in this fashion, for these perfected ones will make known to us what they and their predecessors apprehended concerning this through sensation over time, so that we arrive at the complete truth in this matter in this fashion." (שלימים הקודמים ידריכו אותנו עיון בדרך אשר תגיענו אל) וההצלחה אם מפיחם אם מפי כתבם, בחשק הטבעי אשר להם על זאת ההשפעה, ויודיעונו בדבר דבר דרך החקירה בו, ומה שנתבאר להם בו, עם מה שנעזרו בו בדברי הקודמים להם. ומה שיצטרך אליו השגה בחוש והוא לא תשלם כי אם בקושי ובזמן ארוך, יעבור החיים האנושיים, ישלם גם כן בזה האופן. כי אילו השלימים יודיעו אותנו מה שהושג בו בחוש להם. (ולקודמים להם באורך הזמנים עד שישלם בו הצד האמת בוה. 76–77 / 22–23, translation modified).

⁴¹ Gersonides, 152 / 91.

in other sciences.⁴² In particular, he notes, students of science “require many conditions, including training (*hahergel*) in the art of dialectic, as was mentioned at the beginning of the *Topica*.”⁴³ The reference here is apparently to the opening line of the *Topica*⁴⁴:

The purpose of this study is to discover a method by which we can make syllogisms from accepted opinions about any problem that is set before us, and when we uphold an argument ourselves, we shall not say anything inconsistent.

Ἡ μὲν πρόθεσις τῆς πραγματείας μέθοδον εὐρεῖν ἅφ’ ἧς δυνησόμεθα συλλογίζεσθαι περὶ παντὸς τοῦ προτεθέντος προβλήματος ἐξ ἐνδόξων, καὶ αὐτοὶ λόγον ὑπέχοντες μηθὲν ἐροῦμεν ὑπεναντίον.⁴⁵

Aristotle is extremely general: dialectic can treat any problem that starts from accepted opinions (ἐνδόξα). Averroes brings up the notion of training in his *Middle Commentary* on the opening of the *Topica*, which was probably Gersonides’ source for knowledge of the *Topica*:

However, the benefit of training for the one who contemplates the sciences, i.e., the benefit that comes from and is the point of training in this art, is the most perfect thing that man can acquire with ultimate training: an entrance into philosophy. For philosophy is, in fact, compiled from correct generally accepted premises.

ואולם תועלתה בהרגל המבין לצד הידיעות, ר"ל שהתועלת המגיע ממנה בשיהיה מפני זה ההרגל במעשה בזאת המלאכה, יותר שלם אשר תכלית ההרגל יקנה האדם הכנס מה אל הפלוסופיא, כי הפלוסופיא אמנם תחובר מההקדמות המפורסמות הצודקות.⁴⁶

Averroes’ language here is quite similar to his introduction to the *Metaphysics*, where he referred to those who trained themselves in the sciences of certainty⁴⁷ and, accordingly, hold true thoughts. Between the *Topica* and the *Metaphysics*, Averroes thus goes full circle: training in making deductions from generally accepted principles

⁴² Gersonides may be referring here to the kinds of contradictions between what one thinks before scientific inquiry and what thinks after such inquiry; this insight is pointed out in Dov Schwartz, *Contradiction and Concealment in Medieval Jewish Thought* [Heb.] (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2002), 144–181.

⁴³ יצטרכו אל זה [כלומר אל המטפיסיקה] תנאים רבים. מהם ההרגל במלאכת הנצוח, כמו שנזכר בראש ספר הנצוח, Gersonides, 152 / 91, translation my own.

⁴⁴ In the notes to his English translation, Kellner suggests that this reference is to the *Rhetoric* (n. 91). In the Hebrew edition, Kellner notes, “I did not find the text alluded to” (p. 152, n. 9). מלאכת הנצוח generally refers to the *Topica* and we shall see that the first line of the *Topica* is referred to here.

⁴⁵ Aristotle, *Topica et Sophistici Elenchi*, ed. W.D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), 100a19–21. Translation is my own.

⁴⁶ MS Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod. Hebr. 26, f. 319. From DARE website. The Hebrew translation of this work is still unpublished. English translation is my own.

⁴⁷ See note 33 above.

is an entrance to philosophy in the *Topica* and then a starting point for metaphysics in the *Metaphysics*. The path that the student of Averroes follows from logic to mathematics to natural science to metaphysics may perhaps deepen his understanding of generally accepted premises, but the student is in a similar place, if not in the same place in his study of logic and at the beginning of his study of metaphysics.

For Gersonides, too, references to these parallel sections from the *Topica* and *Metaphysics* frame the inquiry into science that constitutes the bulk of the *Commentary* on the *Song of Songs*. Like Averroes, Gersonides also implies that there is a similarity between the situation of the scholar at the beginning of the inquiry into science and his situation upon reaching *Metaphysics*. Indeed, this is even clearer for Gersonides than for Averroes since he refers repeatedly to “the desire that we have at the beginning of the matter for the *hylic* intellect to cleave to God.”⁴⁸ That is, the erotic situation of Gersonides’ reader is similar at the beginning of the path and at the end: a desire (*teshuqah*) to cleave to God through the active intellect.

To those readers paying careful attention to Gersonides’ use of Averroes, the order of these citations is surprising. He cites Averroes’ *Long Commentary* on *Metaphysics* in Part One of his *Commentary* when explaining the general desire for knowledge and Averroes’ *Middle Commentary* on *Topica* in Part Six of his commentary when explaining the dialectical training that is necessary for metaphysics. We would expect him to do the opposite, to use the *Topica* for the general statement and the *Metaphysics* for that particular to metaphysics. Why does Gersonides invert Averroes’ order of Averroes’ texts? I cannot provide a certain answer, but I can speculate that Gersonides wanted to emphasize what I take to be Averroes’ point that, when the scholar reaches metaphysics after having studied the sciences in the proper order, his situation is quite similar to that of the beginning student. He, too, must take up dialectic to examine common opinions. This examination is the least certain of scientific examinations, according to Gersonides, and in many key respects leaves the scholar ignorant.

IV. Limitations of Human Knowledge of Metaphysics

Gersonides, though, is not a Pyrrhonian sceptic. Not only does he accept the validity of all of the sciences that are prior to metaphysics, such as mathematics and physics, he does not deny the possibility of metaphysics *a priori*. Rather, metaphysics is, as we have mentioned, merely the least certain of the sciences and the one about which the least is known. Despite the centrality of metaphysics to the *Commentary*

⁴⁸ Gersonides, 77 / 24. Kellner’s translation is, in my view, mistaken in its attribution of the desire in question to “our material intellect,” rather than to “us.”

on *Song of Songs*, Gersonides has very little to say about it. It is the last in the progression of the sciences and the culmination of the efforts of the desirer throughout the book. Yet of the one hundred and five pages that make up the Hebrew edition of the *Commentary*, the final chapter on metaphysics takes up only five. Moreover, Gersonides considers only the final 10 verses of *Song of Songs* to concern metaphysics. For comparison, his chapter on mathematics treats eighteen verses over eleven pages and his chapter on physics treats fifty-five verses over thirty-four pages. In fact, the chapter on physics is much larger and more detailed than any of the other chapters.

Physics, of course, builds on previous sciences to derive its principles. Yet it also points forward towards principles that are connected with metaphysics. In particular, Gersonides identifies three apprehensions of the physicist that lead the physicist towards metaphysics: primary matter, the first mover, and the “universal concomitants of existing things that change insofar as they are things that change.”⁴⁹ These apprehensions figure prominently in Aristotle’s *Physics*, especially in the discussion of the unmoved mover in *Physics* VIII. They also all make an appearance in *Metaphysics* α’ ε’ λ’ α’ τ’ τ’ ο’ ν, where they are not so much proved as indicated in a series of arguments. These three apprehensions are thus points of contact between Aristotle’s *Physics* and *Metaphysics*. In that sense, then, they are the culmination of physics which points the desiring soul in the direction of metaphysics.

Gersonides clarifies that knowledge of these attributes is as “attributes and accidents,” i.e., not a knowledge of any of these properties as substances. Such knowledge is based on inferences from observations of physical reality, observations that are posterior to the thing itself. Ideally, the scientist would attain knowledge of a thing’s substance (*‘ešem haddabar*) and then explain the attributes and accidents using the thing’s causes. This kind of substantial knowledge of the First Mover may seem “absurd and impossible; and if there were not another agent here with this emanation, this doubt would seem to be so. But since there is here another agent – the Active Intellect – our acquisition of perfect knowledge on the basis of weak knowledge we have from the senses is not rendered impossible.”⁵⁰ Substantial knowledge of these metaphysical notions might be impossible without the Active Intellect. The Active Intellect, the object of the desire of the *Song of Songs*, thus transforms weak knowledge formed on the basis of sensory perception to strong knowledge of the substance of the thing itself.

⁴⁹ See Gersonides’ comments on *Song of Songs* VI 5, 131–132 / 72–72. English terminology is my own. The Hebrew terms are החומר הראשון, המניע הראשון, and משתנות במה שהם משתנות respectively.

⁵⁰ הידיעה אשר לנו בעצם הדברים [...] כבר יחשב שזה יהיה דבר בטל ובלתי אפשר, אלא שאם לא היה בכאן פועל אחר בזאת ההשפעה היה לזה הספק פנים מההראות. אבל לפי שבכאן פועל אחר – והוא השכל הפועל – הנה לא ימנע קנותינו, באמצעות מהידיעה החלושה אשר לנו מהחוש, ידיעה שלימה. Gersonides, 139 / 79, translation modified.

On the surface, this process seems similar to the Aristotelian method of abstraction that Gersonides lays out repeatedly throughout the *Commentary*. The body observes material phenomena and the attributes (*mesigim*) of these phenomena eventually make their way to the imagination. Then: “After the intellect abstracts from the material attributes – through which the apprehended thing is particular and individual – from the imaginative form, that form becomes universal in substance. That is, the universal nature common to the infinite individuals of that species.”⁵¹ During the scientific process, the human intellect abstracts universal forms from particular phenomena. For example, a biologist might note that all ducks have wings. This is a formal characteristic of the species of duck which a scientist can identify without having seen all, or even most, ducks.

Yet when it comes to metaphysical notions, such as the First Mover, this process is no longer workable. All of the elements in the process of abstraction are missing in the metaphysical cases. There are no material attributes, no imaginative form, i.e., no form that is grasped by the imagination, and no distinction between the particulars of the species and the universals. That is, the scientific process itself breaks down. The human intellect on its own is not able to move from particulars to universals, since there are no particulars.

Gersonides illustrates this difficulty throughout the final chapter on metaphysics in the *Commentary*. According to Gersonides, the verse, “Who is this that cometh up from the wilderness” (*Song of Songs* 8:5),⁵² refers to the apprehension of metaphysical things, which arises from

A place that is desolate, cannot be worked, and cannot be planted. This is so because the things under investigation in the other sciences are apprehended by the senses. Concerning those things, everything that one strives to apprehend of their substance can be done so perfectly. However, here, there is no path to apprehending it [sc. the substance] except by remote premises.⁵³

The scientific method, so carefully adhered to until now, is not applicable to metaphysical substances. Indeed, there is not even a path (*derekh*), according to Gersonides, to apprehension of such substances. By “remote premises” (*haqdamot reḥoqot*) Gersonides apparently means too remote to be grasped by the soul on their own. For immediately afterwards, Gersonides writes,⁵⁴

51 אחר שהפשיט השכל מהצורה הדמיונית המשיגים ההיולאניים אשר היה בהם זה הדבר המושג פרטי ורמוז אליו, שבה 51 / 6, translation modified. See also the similar description at 94 / 38.

52 King James trans. of המדבר מן המדבר.

53 ממקום חרב אשר לא יעבד בו ולא יזרע. וזה כי בשאר החכמות היו הדברים אשר בהם החקירה מושגים בחוש, ומהם ישלם כל מה שישתדלו בהשגתו באילו הדברים מעצם הדברים ההם. ואולם בכאן אין דרך בהשגתו כי אם בהקדמות רחוקות, Gersonides, 150 / 89, translation greatly modified.

54 Gersonides, 150 / 89–90, translation is my own.

Mitrapeqet⁵⁵ *on/toward her beloved* (Song of Songs 8:5) [...]

Since her heart pines for her beloved, since she is not able to satisfy his desire. This word, “*mitrapeqet*,” is a *hapax legomenon*. I think its meaning is according the context, in the manner I have explained. [...] For out of love and *hesheq*, she extends her arms toward her beloved. This is according to the allegory.

However, according to that which is allegorized, it means that she helps him with these arms with all her power, to bring into existence all that she can, so as to be an entryway to enter into the examination of that which he intends to examine. But she apologizes and says to him, *I raised thee up under the apple tree*, i.e., I have already helped you apprehend the sensible things, which are the physical matters. [...]

Despite all this she has a great *hesheq* to fulfil his desire however she can.

מתרפקת על דודה [...]

שלבה הומה עליה בעבור דודה, על אשר לא תוכל להפיק רצונו. והנה אין חבר לזאת המילה, רוצה לומר 'מתרפקת', ואחשב שיהיה עניינה לפי מקומו על הצד שביארתי [...] שמרוב האהבה והחשק תשים זרועותיה על דודה, וזה לפי המשל.

ואולם לפי הנמשל ירצה באילו הזרועות שהיא תעזרהו בכל כחה להמציא אליו מה שאפשר אליה המצאתו, להיות לו מבוא להכנס בחקירות אשר ירצה לחקור בהם, והיא מתנצלת ואומרת אליו כבר 'עוררתיך תחת התפוח', רוצה לומר כבר עזרתך בהשגת הדברים המוחשים – והם העניינים הטבעיים [...]

ועם כל זה היא רבת החשק למלאות תשוקתו בכל אשר תוכל.

The desiring soul extends her arms towards her beloved in an act that Gersonides says can have two meanings. 1. It is an expression of longing for the beloved, a longing that is an expression of an inability to fulfil the beloved's wishes. 2. Alternatively, the extended arms are an expression of the desiring soul's industrious study of physics. Even so, the desiring soul cannot determine how to move beyond physics and is left only with “a great *hesheq* to fulfil his [sc. the beloved's] desire however she can.” She can only apologize to the beloved for her own limitations, an apology that takes place “under the apple tree.”

Now, had Gersonides just left it at that, with the physicist unhappily ruminating under an apple-tree, the stage would have been set for an apple to fall, hit the physicist on the head, and cause him to rethink the basic principles of physics. Yet Gersonides is not quite there. Rather, it is Solomon, i.e., according to Gersonides, the Active Intellect, who shows up with the unifying form that connects the multitude of forms examined in physics. Gersonides is not entirely clear about what is involved in this process. Indeed, he devotes only about two pages to it, most of which are figurative explanations of how the many unite with the one. Rather than giving details about what is understood from metaphysics, Gersonides refers to the emanation (*shefa*) of the Active Intellect. This emanation, Gersonides makes clear, can only happen once physics is understood suitably,⁵⁶ but there is no clear connection between the physical

⁵⁵ Most translations, including the King James Version, translate this word “leaning on.” However, the ambiguity of this term is central to Gersonides' argument here.

⁵⁶ Gersonides, 154–155 / 93–94.

forms and the metaphysical. It is all somewhat mysterious. Such mystery is, of course, perfectly understandable, since the reader of the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* has not necessarily studied enough physics. For those who do not experience the emanation of the Active Intellect, what happens in the orchard stays in the orchard.

V: Conclusion

According to Gersonides' account of the order of the sciences, the Active Intellect (Solomon) always remains separate from the desiring soul. There is no unification, only emanation. That is, the true understanding of metaphysical substances does not come from within the soul but has an entirely external source. The move from physics to metaphysics requires something entirely external. It requires something the possibility of which is not comprehensible: the separate, incorporeal Active Intellect must join with the bodily soul.

If this process is incomprehensible, then it is also indescribable. Prior sciences can be described in great detail, but metaphysics, which involves this intellectual emanation, must be experienced. It is thus clear why Gersonides has so little to say about metaphysics in the final chapter of the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* and why he considers Solomon to treat the subject in only 10 verses. We may even speculate that this may explain why Gersonides abandoned his own commentary on the *Metaphysics*, the beginning of which is listed in his library but has never been found.⁵⁷ Ultimately, any understanding of metaphysics depends on a kind of *Intellectus ex machina* and thus nothing is to be gained by speaking about the subject. One would be better off devoting his efforts to mathematics, astronomy, and physics, which are attainable by the human soul alone, as, in fact, Gersonides himself did. It is possible that the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* is, in a sense, a replacement for Gersonides' commentary on *Metaphysics*, one that suggests the impossibility of human apprehension of metaphysics on one's own and instead exhorts readers to devote themselves to the physical sciences.

Gersonides' *Commentary on the Song of Songs* may build off of Averroes, but it is in key respects opposed to Averroes and even anti-Aristotelian. Instead, we find a Platonic account of the desire for metaphysical knowledge, a surprising account since there is no reason to believe Gersonides read any Plato. The desire for metaphysical

⁵⁷ See n. 24 above. For the *Commentary on the Metaphysics* in the library of Gersonides, see Gérard Weil, *La Bibliothèque de Gersonide d'après son catalogue autographe*, ed. Frédéric Chartrain, Anne-Marie Weil-Guény, Joseph Shatzmiller (Louvain and Paris: Peeters, 1991), 47 and 99. Gersonides also mentions the commentary three times in *Wars* and once in the *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (see Sara Klein-Braslavy, "The Opinions that Give Rise to the Apories in Gersonides' *Wars of the Lord*," in *Without Any Doubt*, n. 33). The reference in the *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* occurs right at the beginning of the introduction, *Perushe hammegillot*, 15.

knowledge, if properly directed, leads the desirer up the ladder of love, through the sciences. The desirer devotes himself to physics and from there glimpses metaphysical notions, such as the existence of the Unmoved Mover. Yet the desirer is unable to do more than glimpse these notions. He or she relies instead on the Active Intellect to emanate upon it, an end for which the desirer can prepare but cannot cause.

There is no sex in the *Song of Songs*, only preparation, and in Gersonides' account there is only preparation for metaphysics. If the Active Intellect does not show up, the desiring soul will find herself alone, despairing under the apple tree. An apple could then fall from the tree.

Selected Bibliography

- Al-Fārābī, Abu Naṣr. *De Platonis Philosophia*. Edited by Franz Rosenthal and Richard Walzer. London: Warburg Institute, 1943.
- Al-Ḥarizi, Judah. *Mussare Hafilosofim*. Edited by A. Loewenthal. Frankfurt am Main: Kaufmann, 1895.
- Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. Edited by W. D. Ross. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924.
- Aristotle. *Topica et Sophistici Elenchi*. Edited by W. D. Ross. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958.
- Averroes. *Decisive Treatise and Epistle Dedicatory*. Translated by Charles Butterworth. Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2001.
- Averroes. *Il Commento medio di Averroè alla Metafisica di Aristotele nella tradizione ebraica: Edizione delle versioni ebraiche medievali di Zerahyah Hen e di Qalonymos ben Qalonymos con introduzione storica e filologica*. Edited by Mauro Zonta. Pavia: Pavia University Press, 2011.
- Averroes. Long Commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Anonymous Hebrew translation. MS héb. 886. Bibliothèque nationale de France.
- Averroes. Long Commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Translated by Moses ben Solomon of Salon. MS héb. 887. Bibliothèque nationale de France.
- Averroes. *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's Topica*. Qalonimos b. Qalonimos, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Cod. Hebr. 26, f. 319r–402v, available online: <http://dare.uni-koeln.de/>
- Averroes. *On Aristotle's "Metaphysics": An Annotated Translation of the So-called "Epitome."* Translated by Rüdiger Arnzen. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010.
- Averroes. *Tafsir ma ba'd at-tabi'ah*. Edited by Maurice Bouyges. Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1938–1942.
- Ben Asher, Baḥya. *Kitve Rabbenu Baḥya*. Edited by Charles B. Chavel. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1969.
- Ben Gershon, Levi. *Commentary on Song of Songs*. Edited by Menachem Kellner. Ramat Gan, Israel: Bar Ilan University Press, 2003.
- Ben Gershon, Levi. *Commentary on Song of Songs*. Translated by Menachem Kellner. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.
- Gersonides, Levi. *Wars of the Lord*. Leipzig: Lorck, 1866.
- Gersonides. *Perushe hammegillot*. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 2003.
- Gersonides. *Wars of the Lord*, vol. 1. Translated by Seymour Feldman. Philadelphia: JPS, 1984.
- Glasner, Ruth. "Gersonides' Lost Commentary on the *Metaphysics*." *Medieval Encounters* 4 (1998): 130–157.
- Glasner, Ruth. "The Evolution of the Genre of the Commentary in Gersonides." *DAAT: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah* 74–75 (2013): 185–196.

- Glasner, Ruth. *Gersonides: A Portrait of a Fourteenth-Century Philosopher-Scientist*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Golb, Norman. "Hebrew Translation of Averroes' *Faṣl al-Maqāl*." *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 25 (1956): 91–113.
- Halper, Yehuda. "Revision and Standardization of Hebrew Philosophical Terminology in the Fourteenth Century: The Example of Averroes' *Long Commentary* on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Δ and the Development of Hebrew Scientific Terms." *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism* 13 (2013): 95–138.
- Harvey, Steven. "Avicenna and Maimonides on Prayer and Intellectual Worship." In *Exchange and Transmission across Cultural Boundaries: Philosophy, Mysticism and Science in the Mediterranean World*, edited by Haggai Ben-Shammai, 82–105. Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 2013.
- Harvey, Steven. "The Meaning of Terms Designating Love in Judaeo-Arabic Thought and Some Remarks on the Judaeo-Arabic Interpretation of Maimonides." In *Studies in Muslim-Jewish Relations III*, edited by Norman Golb, 175–196. Reading, UK: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996.
- Harvey, Steven. "The Quiddity of Philosophy According to Averroes and Falaquera, a Muslim Philosopher and his Jewish Interpreter." *Miscellanea Mediaevalia* 26 (2012): 904–913.
- Harvey, Steven. *Falaquera's Epistle of the Debate: An Introduction to Jewish Philosophy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987.
- Ḥunayn Ibn Ishāq. *ʿādāb al-falāsifah*. Edited by Abdurrahman Badawi. Kuwait: l'Institut des Manuscrits Arabes, 1985.
- Ibn Falaquera, Shem Tob. *Reshit Hokhmah*. Edited by Mortiz David. Berlin: Poppelauer, 1902.
- Kellner, Menachem. "Gersonides on Imitatio Dei and the Dissemination of Scientific Knowledge." *Jewish Quarterly Review* 85 (1995): 275–296.
- Klein-Braslavy, Sara. *"Without Any Doubt": Gersonides on Method and Knowledge*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011.
- Maimonides, Moses. *Guide of the Perplexed*. Translated by Samuel Ibn Tibbon. Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1981.
- Maimonides, Moses. *Guide of the Perplexed*. Translated by Shlomo Pines. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963.
- Plato. *Platonis Opera*, vol. ii. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901, rpt. 1953.
- Schwartz, Dov. *Contradiction and Concealment in Medieval Jewish Thought*. Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2002.
- Touati, Charles. *La Pensée Philosophique et Théologique de Gersonide*. Paris: Minuit, 1973.
- Weil, Gérard. *La Bibliothèque de Gersonide d'après son catalogue autographe*. Louvain and Paris: Peeters, 1991.
- Wex, Michael. *Born to Kvetch: Yiddish Language and Culture in All of Its Mood*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005.

Warren Zev Harvey

Maimonides, Crescas, and the Parable of the Castle

Rabbi Hasdai Crescas, the foremost medieval critic of Maimonides' philosophy, was born in Barcelona around 1340, which is about two centuries after the birth of Maimonides in Cordoba in 1138. Crescas died in Saragossa in the winter of 1410/11. He was the judge of the Jews of the Crown of Aragon and advisor to King Joan I and Queen Violant de Bar, the famed benefactress of the arts and sciences. In this chapter, I will discuss Crescas' sceptical critique of Maimonides. His critique of the Aristotelian concepts of place, time, the impossibility of an actual infinity, and the *horror vacui*, are documented in Harry Austryn Wolfson's monumental study, *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle*.¹ It is also discussed in my much more modest volume, *Physics and Metaphysics in Hasdai Crescas*.²

When we speak of Crescas' sceptical critique of Maimonides, a question immediately forces itself upon us: What is the difference between Crescas' scepticism and Maimonides' scepticism?³ This question is at the heart of the phenomenon of Jewish scepticism. What is the difference between the scepticism of Crescas and the scepticism of Maimonides? For example, both philosophers are critical of the medieval proofs of God confidently affirmed by most other medieval philosophers. Both believe that what Maimonides called premise 26, namely the eternity of motion, has not been proved, and thus the proofs of God based on it are invalid. What, then, is the difference between Crescas' scepticism and Maimonides'?

The polysemic parable of the castle

In order to illustrate the difference between the scepticisms of Maimonides and Crescas, I turn now to a midrash found in *Genesis Rabbah*, 39:1 (and parallels). The different ways that Maimonides and Crescas interpret this midrash will illustrate the differences in their kinds of scepticism. This midrash may be called "The Parable of the Castle." It runs as follows:

1 Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929).

2 Warren Zev Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics in Hasdai Crescas* (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1998).

3 Much has been written recently about Maimonides' scepticism. See Josef Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides' Guide* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). Cf. Warren Zev Harvey, "Maimonides' Critical Epistemology and *Guide*, II, 24," *Aleph* 8 (2008): 213–235.

The Lord said to Abram: "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee" [Genesis 12:1] This may be compared by way of parable to someone who was walking on the way from place to place, and saw a *birah doleqet* [a castle "illuminated" or "afire"]. He said, "Could you say this castle has no governor [*manhig*]?" The master of the castle looked down upon him, and said to him, "I am the master of the castle!" So Abraham our father would say, "Could you say this world has no Governor?!" The Holy One, blessed be He, looked down upon him, and said to him, "I am the Master of the world!"⁴

The Parable of the Castle is intended to help us understand God's command to Abram or Abraham, "Get thee out of thy country [...] unto the land that I will show thee." Abraham is likened to a traveller who arrives at a *birah doleqet*. The traveller wonders: Could it be that this castle has no governor (*manhig*)?! The governor appears and says, "I am the master of the castle!" So Abraham wondered, Could it be that this world has no Governor (*manhig*)?! God appeared to him and said, "I am the Master of the world!" However, what is a *birah doleqet*? The Hebrew word *doleqet* is ambiguous here because it bears two possible meanings. It might mean an illumined or well-lit castle, but it also might mean a castle aflame or afire.

According to the first meaning ("an illumined castle"), the midrash would be explained as follows: A traveller enters a castle late at night and finds the lights shining, and people strolling in the streets or relaxing in coffee houses. There is, he observes, order and safety here. The castle, he infers, must have a governor! The governor then appears and confirms the inference. Therefore, the Parable of the Castle concerns what philosophers call "the argument from design" or "the teleological argument": Abraham saw that there is purposeful order in the universe, and, on the basis of this order, he inferred the existence of the Governor of the universe, God.

According to the second meaning ("a castle aflame"), the midrash would be explained as follows: The castle is ablaze, burning wildly. The world is up in flames. The wicked are running rampant. There is no order or safety. It seems that the castle has no governor. However, the governor then appears. Thus, notwithstanding the flames, there is a governor. The Parable of the Castle accordingly concerns what philosophers call "the problem of evil." Abraham, in spite of the evil in the world around him, affirms the existence of the Governor of the universe or God.

In medieval literature, we find both readings. Modern scholars tend to prefer the second, "a castle aflame."⁵ Maimonides and Crescas preferred the first reading, "an illumined castle."⁶

⁴ The midrash, with commentaries, is found in standard Rabbinic editions of *Genesis Rabbah*, ad loc.

⁵ Paul Mandel, "The Call of Abraham: A Midrash Revisited," *Prooftexts* 14 (1994): 287–294. According to Mandel, the term *birah* refers here to what is known in Roman architecture as an *insula*, a large tenement containing dwellings and shops (275). In biblical Hebrew, the term is usually translated as "castle" (e.g., Esther 1:2; Nehemiah 2:8).

⁶ See Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics*, 47–48, 60–65. The interpretation of *birah doleqet* as "an illumined castle" is found also in Pseudo-Rashi, Commentary on *Genesis Rabbah*, standard Rabbinic

Scholars have debated the nature and role of polysemy in Rabbinic literature.⁷ What is noteworthy in the present case is that the polysemy is clearly unintentional. The ambiguity, uncertainty, or polysemy of the phrase *birah doleqet* was surely not intended by the author of the midrash. The polysemy is caused here by our ignorance of the idiomatic usage of the term *doleq/et* in Rabbinic Hebrew. Presumably, the early audiences of this midrash understood the unequivocal meaning of the term – and of the midrash. They knew whether the midrash was talking about the argument from design or the problem of evil. Due to our ignorance, the phrase and the midrash are polysemic to us. One might say that the long history of commentary on this midrash has turned it into a polysemic parable. Put another way, we owe the rich and provocative polysemy of this midrash not to its author but to our ignorance. This is not a cause for regret. Unintentional polysemy is no less fecund than artful polysemy, just as Alexander Fleming’s discovery of penicillin was no less wondrous because it happened serendipitously and just as the Earthlings’ victory over the Jovians in Isaac Asimov’s “Victory Unintentional” was no less salvific because it was due to a misunderstanding.

The importance of ignorance as a stimulus for creative interpretation can hardly be underestimated. Maimonides, for example, was well aware that our ignorance of an ancient language could be very convenient for the creative commentator. In *Guide*, I, 67, when defending his highly conjectural interpretation of the Hebrew *va-yanaḥ* (Exodus 20:11), which he suggests does not mean “and God rested” but “and God established existence perpetually,” he remarks: “today we have no complete understanding of the science of our language.”⁸

Maimonides’ interpretation of the parable

Now, let’s see what Maimonides does with the Parable of the Castle. In his *Mišneh Torah*, Hilkhoh ‘Avodah Zarah 1:3, he writes:

editions, ad loc. According to Pseudo-Rashi: “[Abraham] saw heaven and earth; he saw the sun by day and the moon by night, and the stars giving forth light. He said: ‘Is it possible that something so grand is without a Governor?’ The Holy One, blessed be He, looked down upon him and said, ‘I am the Master of the world.’” This commentary is a composite work, written in Ashkenaz, and roughly contemporaneous with Maimonides.

7 E.g., Steven Fraade, “Rabbinic Polysemy and Pluralism Revisited,” *AJS Review* 31 (2007): 1–40; Azzan Yadin-Israel, “Rabbinic Polysemy: A Response to Steven Fraade,” *AJS Review* 38 (2014): 129–141; “Response to Azzan Yadin-Israel on Rabbinic Polysemy: Do They ‘Preach’ What They Practice?” *AJS Review* 38 (2014): 339–361.

8 Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 162. Cf. his unusual interpretation there of Exodus 31:17.

As soon as this mighty one [Abraham] was weaned, he began to wander about in his mind, and he was little, and he began to think day and night, and wondered: How is it possible that this [celestial] sphere revolves [*noheg*] perpetually, if it does not have a Governor [*manhig*]? Who causes it to revolve, for it is impossible that it causes itself to revolve?⁹

No sooner was he weaned than little Abraham began to study the universe. The inquisitive child wondered: How is it possible for the celestial sphere to spin eternally unless it has a Governor, a *manhig*? The use of the word *manhig* makes it clear that Maimonides is alluding to the Parable of the Castle. Tiny Abraham employed the argument from design. The orderly motions of the heavens prove that the world has a Governor. The biblical story has been given a new interpretation: “the sphere revolves perpetually” renders “Get thee out of thy country!” Whereas in the Parable of the Castle the protagonist travels “from place to place,” Maimonides’ reflective Abraham “wanders about in his mind.” As for the *birah doleqet*, it may be understood now to be the starlit heavens.

The proof from the eternal motion of the spheres is essentially Aristotle’s physical proof of the Prime Mover in *Physics*, VIII, 5–6, 256a–260a, and *Metaphysics*, XII, 6–7, 1071b–1073a. Maimonides expounds upon it in detail in *Guide of the Perplexed*, II, 1–2. He explains there that this proof – and similar proofs – require 26 premises, which amount to a precis of Aristotelian physics and metaphysics.¹⁰ The eternal or perpetual motion of the spheres requires a Mover, namely, God.

In *Mišneh Torah*, Hilkhot Yesode ha-Torah 1:1–7, Maimonides legislates this proof as a means of fulfilling the three fundamental commandments of knowing God (Exodus 20:2), not imagining other Gods (ibid.), and knowing God’s unity (Deuteronomy 6:4). Significantly, God is defined as “the Governor [*manhig*] of the sphere” in Hilkhot Yesode ha-Torah 1:5. Thus, the proof from the eternal motion of the spheres is not only philosophy but law – not only Abraham’s personal contemplative way to God but Moses’ binding commandment. If you want to be a good Jew who obeys Jewish law, you must learn this proof. Knowledge of God is based on Aristotelian physics and metaphysics.

Having said all this, I must also observe that Maimonides states explicitly that premise 26 of the 26 premises, namely, the eternity of motion, is not sufficiently proved because we have no empirical knowledge of the heavens, and thus the proof from the eternal motion of the spheres is invalid.¹¹ It is presented as Abraham’s proof and set down in the fundamental laws concerning the knowledge of God, but, since it is based on an unproved premise, it is not logically valid.

Let me insert one further observation: While loyal Aristotelians like Al-Fārābī and Averroes considered the proof from the motion of the heavens to be a logically valid

⁹ The *Mišneh Torah* is available in standard Rabbinic editions.

¹⁰ *Guide of the Perplexed*, II, Introduction, 235–241.

¹¹ *Guide*, 240–241.

deduction, Maimonides seems to have considered it to be no more than an inductive inference. He considered it to be a sort of argument from design: the motions of the heavens provide evidence of order. He explicitly endorses the argument from design in various chapters of the *Guide*. In Part III, Chapter 21, he distinguishes between the clockmaker's perfect *a priori* knowledge of a clepsydra and the observer's imperfect *a posteriori* knowledge of it, asserting that our knowledge of the universe is always *a posteriori* and limited.¹² In Part I, Chapter 46, he argues that as the existence of law and order in a city indicates that it has a ruler, by analogy the existence of law and order in the universe indicates that it too has a Ruler.¹³ In Part II, Chapter 19, he remarks, alluding to the Parable of the Castle, that Abraham proved the existence of God by means of his "contemplation of the stars."¹⁴ In the same paragraph, he cites Isaiah 40:26, "Lift up your eyes on high, and see: who hath created these!"¹⁵ It seems to Maimonides' mind that the proof from the "contemplation of the stars" was *ab initio* intended as inductive, not deductive, and thus the fact that premise 26 is unproved was in no way a problem.¹⁶

Crescas' interpretation of the parable

Crescas recoiled from Maimonides' dependence on Aristotle. In his *Light of the Lord*, Book I, Part 3, Chapter 6, he quotes the Parable of the Castle in full, giving it a different emphasis than Maimonides.¹⁷ He argues that the moral of the Parable is that philosophical demonstrations can give one an *inclination* (*netiyyah*) towards the knowledge of God, but cannot establish that knowledge. They can lead one to ask if the world has a Governor, but cannot answer the question. According to Crescas, we do not know God by means of science or philosophy, but by means of *prophecy*. Abraham did not discover the Governor by reasoning: the Governor appears to him and announces that He is the Governor! Abraham does not find God – God finds him. This, Crescas reminds us, is what is expressly written in the midrashic text: "So Abraham our father would say, 'Could you say this world has no Governor?!' The Holy

¹² *Guide*, 484–485.

¹³ *Guide*, 97–98.

¹⁴ *Guide*, 310.

¹⁵ *Ibid*.

¹⁶ Cf. Stern, *Matter and Form*, 149: "Maimonides [...] repeatedly states that 'the heaven' or 'the revolution of the heaven' proves the existence of the deity, but he does not tell us *what about* the heaven or its revolution proves this." See also Warren Zev Harvey, "Les nœuds du *Guide des égarés*: une critique de la lecture politique de Leo Strauss," in Géraldine Roux, ed., *Lumières médiévales* (Paris: Van Dieren, 2009): 176.

¹⁷ *Light of the Lord*, 122. Page references to the *Light* are to *Or ha-Šem*, ed. S. Fisher (Jerusalem: Ramot, 1990).

One, blessed be He, looked down upon him, and said to him, ‘I am the Master of the world!’” Crescas explains this unequivocally: “They [the Rabbinic authors of the midrash] revealed that although he [Abraham] had an inclination [*netiyyah*] toward the truth, he did not escape all doubt [*safeq*] until He caused His light to overflow upon him, which is prophecy.”¹⁸ Although inclined by Reason towards the knowledge of God, Abraham could not free himself from *doubt* until God spoke to him. Reason alone cannot overcome scepticism concerning God: only prophecy dispels all doubt. Little Abraham began as a sceptic.¹⁹ Crescas uses the concept of doubt in a similar way twice in his discussion of the philosophical proofs for the unity of God in *Light of the Lord*, I, 3, 4.²⁰

We have now come upon a different kind of ambiguity. Maimonides and Crescas agree that the Parable of the Castle is about the argument from design, not the problem of evil, but they disagree about its moral: Maimonides claims that the Parable teaches that philosophy proves the existence of God and Crescas claims that it teaches that philosophy does not provide such a proof.

In *Light of the Lord*, Book I, Part 2, Chapter 15, Crescas attacks Maimonides’ physical proof of God from the motion of the celestial sphere.²¹ Six premises needed for the proof (1, 2, 3, 8, 12, and 16) are rejected by Crescas as having been disproved.²² As for premise 26, Maimonides himself admitted that it was not proved.²³ Without premise 1, the mover of the sphere could be an infinite body. Without premise 8, the motion of the sphere could be caused by an infinite force in a finite body. Without premise 12, it could be caused by a finite body. Without premises 2, 3, and 16, it could be caused by a plurality or even an infinity of causes.²⁴ In other words, without any one of these premises, the perpetual or eternal motion of the celestial spheres, even if presupposed, need not be caused by the One and omnipotent God. It could very well be caused by a corporeal or limited factor or by many corporeal or limited factors.

18 Ibid.

19 The sceptical interpretation of the Parable of the Castle recurs in later authors. See, e.g., Benjamin Williams, “Doubting Abraham Doubting God: The Call of Abraham in the *Or ha-Sekhel*,” *Melilah* 12 (2015): 31–42.

20 *Light*, 115–116. See Warren Zev Harvey, “The Problem of Many Gods in Al- Ghazālī, Averroes, Maimonides, and Sforino,” in Guiseppe Veltri, Emidio Spinelli, Racheli Haliva, and Stephan Schmid, eds., *Scepticism and Anti-Scepticism* (Hamburg: Maimonides Centre, forthcoming).

21 *Light*, 88–89.

22 Crescas’ critique of Maimonides’ premises is analysed in depth in Wolfson’s *Crescas’ Critique*. The six premises in question (1, 2, 3, 8, 12, and 16) are found in *Guide*, II, Introduction, 235–237: (1) an infinite magnitude is impossible; (2) an infinite number of magnitudes is impossible; (3) an infinite number of causes and effects is impossible; (8) everything moved by accident must come to rest; (12) every force in a body is finite; and (16) multiplicity cannot be cognized in incorporeal entities, unless they are causes and effects.

23 *Guide*, 240–241.

24 *Light*, 88.

Moreover, Crescas continues, even if we grant that all 26 premises are proved, the proof still does not work – since it proves that the mover must be a power that is infinite in time (*zeman*) but not in intensity or force (*hozeq*).²⁵ Furthermore, Crescas had already argued (*Light*, I, 1, 6; I, 2, 8) that the motion of the spheres is natural, and thus needs no mover; it may be conjectured to move itself.²⁶

In sum, the premises of the Greek are false, and can provide no basis for Judaism.²⁷

Crescas does, however, permit one proof of God, which he sets down succinctly in *Light of the Lord*, Book I, Part 3, Chapter 2.²⁸ I refer to the celebrated metaphysical proof praised by Spinoza and translated by him into Latin in his “Letter on Infinity” (to Ludwig Meyer, no. 12). According to this proof, an infinite regression is possible, but then one must ask: Who or what is responsible for this regression? Who or what is responsible for the totality of infinite causes and effects in the world? Who or what, in Crescas’ view, is responsible for the preponderance of their existence over their non-existence? While the proof, according to Crescas, establishes the existence of a cause of causes, it does not establish the existence of a personal God or a unique God.²⁹

Two kinds of scepticism

What then is the difference between Crescas’ scepticism and Maimonides’ scepticism?³⁰ Maimonides considers the Aristotelian physical proof of God invalid, though he also believes the proof conforms to the observed phenomena and is for all practical purposes a good proof. Moreover, he believes that it is an intrinsic part of our effort to know God. He thus legislated its use as a means to fulfil the fundamental commandments of knowing God and His oneness. He recognizes the problems in the proof, but considers them subversive from a pedagogical point of view. Doubts about the proof could lead immature or unaccomplished readers to doubts about the existence of God, doubts about the worth of natural science, or doubts about the viability of rational religion. Consequently, he does not mention any doubts when he presents

²⁵ *Light*, 89.

²⁶ *Light*, 36–38, 42–43.

²⁷ Cf. *Light*, Introduction, 8–9: “The root of the thing is that there has not been found until now a disputant of the proofs of the Greek [Aristotle] who has darkened the eyes of Israel in this our time [...] Since the foundation of the error and the perplexity is the dependence on the words of the Greek [...], I have seen fit to call attention to the fallaciousness of his proofs and the fraudulence of his arguments, including those used by the Master [Maimonides].” If Maimonides had thought Aristotle was part of the solution to our perplexity, Crescas considers him its main cause.

²⁸ *Light*, 98–99.

²⁹ See Warren Zev Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics*, 84–92.

³⁰ Harvey, 59–60.

the proof in the *Mišneh Torah*, Hilkhoh Yesode ha-Torah, Chapter 1, a non-technical text intended for all readers. In the *Guide of the Perplexed*, a technical philosophical book intended only for readers who have studied some philosophy, he mentions the problems, but does so discreetly and only by way of hints. In a remarkable passage in *Guide*, Part II, Chapter 24, he writes an aside to Joseph ben Judah, his loyal student and the addressee of the book: When you studied the *Almagest* with me, I did not reveal these doubts to you “for fear of confusing you.”³¹ Scepticism is epistemologically justified but pedagogically subversive. Maimonides considered it so subversive that he did not even reveal his doubts concerning Aristotelian astrophysics to his prize student, Joseph ben Judah, when they studied Ptolemy’s *Almagest* together. Only after Joseph had advanced in his studies of astronomy and astrophysics did Maimonides allow himself to reveal these doubts to him. One does not expose beginners to sceptical ideas, even very talented beginners. Doubts can be confusing, depressing, and frustrating. They can lead students to despair of religion, science, or both. The Pythagorean philosopher Hippasus of Metapontum is said to have been drowned at sea because he revealed publicly the secret of the existence of irrational numbers. Apparently, it was subversive in the eyes of the Pythagoreans to teach beginning students about irrational numbers, just as it was subversive in Maimonides’ eyes to teach the young Joseph ben Judah about problems in Aristotle’s astrophysics. Maimonides was a dogmatist exoterically, but a sceptic esoterically.

Crescas was a different kind of sceptic. He agreed with Maimonides that the Aristotelian physical proof of God was invalid; however, unlike Maimonides, he thought it was important to proclaim this invalidity loudly and lucidly to everyone – beginners and adepts alike. He was an *exoteric* sceptic. Religion does not need any supposed help from science, and a religionist does not need to pretend that science can prove the existence of God. The most science can do is give one an inclination towards knowing God. It cannot dispel all doubt about Him. Moreover, science itself progresses best when it is sceptical and critical, not when it pats itself on the back. Science thrives on doubt and self-questioning. As for religion, it thrives when it is independent of science.

Is scepticism a useful educational tool or a subversive one? Does it make students more inquisitive or less? Is it good for science or subversive to it? Is it good for religion or subversive to it? Which is the bigger threat to science and religion: scepticism or dogmatism? These questions touch on the basic differences between Maimonides’ esoteric scepticism and Crescas’ exoteric scepticism and explain their different interpretations of the Parable of the Castle.

31 *Guide*, 325.

Selected Bibliography

- Crescas, Hasdai. *Or ha-Šem*. Edited by Shlomo Fisher. Jerusalem: Ramot, 1990.
- Fraade, Steven. "Rabbinic Polysemy and Pluralism Revisited." *AJS Review* 31 (2007): 1–40.
- Fraade, Steven. "Response to Azzan Yadin-Israel on Rabbinic Polysemy: Do They 'Preach' What They Practice?" *AJS Review* 38 (2014): 339–361.
- Harvey, Warren Zev. "Les nœuds du *Guide des égarés*: une critique de la lecture politique de Leo Strauss." In *Lumières médiévales*, edited by Géraldine Roux. Paris: Van Dieren (2009): 163–176.
- Harvey, Warren Zev. *Physics and Metaphysics in Hasdai Crescas*. Amsterdam: Gieben, 1998.
- Harvey, Warren Zev. "Maimonides' Critical Epistemology and *Guide*, II, 24." *Aleph* 8 (2008): 213–235.
- Maimonides, Moses. *The Guide of the Perplexed*. Translated by Shlomo Pines. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963.
- Mandel, Paul. "The Call of Abraham: A Midrash Revisited." *Prooftexts* 14 (1994): 287–294.
- Pseudo-Rashi. *Commentary on Genesis Rabbah*. In standard Rabbinic editions of *Genesis Rabbah*.
- Stern, Josef. *The Matter and Form of Maimonides' Guide*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013.
- Williams, Benjamin. "Doubting Abraham Doubting God: The Call of Abraham in the *Or ha-Sekhel*." *Melilah* 12 (2015): 31–42.
- Wolfson, Harry Austryn. *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929.
- Yadin-Israel, Azzan. "Rabbinic Polysemy: A Response to Steven Fraade." *AJS Review* 38 (2014): 129–141.

Index

- Account of the Chariot, the 41, 75, 76, 79, 80, 89, 101, 133
- Adam 26, 33, 72, 73, 80
- Aggada/Aggadot 4, 107, 112, 117, 118, 120, 121, 122, 128
- Al-Andalus 27, 28
- Albalag, Isaac 4, 5, 10, 124, 125, 126, 130, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143
- Al-Fārābī 91, 100, 102, 103
- Al-Ghazālī 2, 12, 13, 14, 29, 30, 36, 130, 131, 136, 138
- Almagest* 88, 151, 174
- Anatoli, Jacob 119
- Anti-scepticism 1, 6, 86, 102, 104
- Aristotle 1, 5, 8, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 23, 30, 32, 33, 34, 43, 46, 47, 87, 90, 91, 92, 93, 95, 103, 119, 130, 133, 134, 136, 152, 153, 154, 155, 156, 157, 158, 159, 161, 170, 171, 174
- Artifice 42, 52, 53, 63
- Ash'arite 139
- Asimov, Isaac 169
- Asmakhta 111, 112, 127
- Averroes 5, 10, 16, 97, 120, 124, 125, 130, 131, 135, 138, 139, 140, 142, 143, 151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 156, 157, 158, 159, 160, 164, 170
- Avicenna 13, 86, 91, 97, 103
- Belief 4, 8, 9, 12, 37, 52, 61, 63, 65, 69, 70, 71, 73, 76, 77, 79, 80, 86, 87, 88, 96, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 108, 125, 132, 136, 143
- Ben Abraham, Levi 4, 120, 123
- Ben Maimon, Abraham ben Moses 29
- Ben Uziel, Jonathan 115
- Bible 3, 5, 6, 25, 26, 36, 37, 84, 121, 122, 130, 138, 142, 153
- Black, Deborah 91, 100
- Castle, Parable of the 6, 167, 172
- Certain knowledge 4, 12, 15, 87, 88, 98, 156
- Certainty 4, 18, 19, 32, 33, 93, 99, 100, 101
- Commentary on the Mishnah* 88, 89, 109, 110, 117, 118, 121, 134
- Communion 64, 66
- Conventions 29, 30, 31
- Corporeality 25, 26, 28, 32, 34, 60, 61, 63, 97, 136
- Crescas, Hasdai 6, 12, 14, 167
- Demonstration, Demonstrative Arguments 4, 10, 18, 20, 23, 30, 31, 33, 34, 35, 36, 64, 87, 89, 90, 91, 95, 99, 101, 104
- Derash/derashah* 112, 117
- Design, Argument from 168, 169, 170, 171, 172
- Desire 5, 8, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 64, 90, 104, 146, 147, 148, 155, 156, 157, 158, 160, 161, 163, 164
- Dialectical reasoning/syllogisms/arguments 10, 23, 30, 31, 35, 37, 112
- Divine attributes 42, 43, 58, 62, 63, 84, 97
- Divine particularization 90, 92, 93
- Dogma 59, 60, 108
- Dogmaticism 3, 4, 18, 51, 60, 67, 68, 72, 74, 84, 107, 108, 109, 124, 128
- Double truth 125
- Doubt 1, 4, 12, 15, 23, 35, 44, 45, 83, 87, 90, 92, 94, 95, 100, 101, 102, 103, 108, 109, 152, 161, 172, 173, 174
- Education 4, 43, 51, 54, 61, 100
- Epistemology 17, 19, 24, 29, 33, 36, 91, 98, 103
- Eros 5, 53, 63, 64, 146, 147, 148, 150
- Erotic, eroticization 5, 54, 55, 64, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, 154, 160
- Esoteric writing 15
- Eternity 7, 25, 26, 32, 33, 35, 61, 95, 96, 103
- Evil, Problem of 168, 169, 172
- Exegesis 4, 41, 70, 107
- Falāsifa 27, 29, 30, 31, 32, 35, 36
- First Principles (First Ideas) 18, 29, 30, 87, 88, 99, 131
- Fleming, Alexander 169
- Gaon, Saadia 1, 11, 28, 112
- Generally-accepted Beliefs 32
- Generally accepted opinions 30, 159
- Genesis (*Bereshit*) 5, 68, 130, 136, 141
- Gersonides 2, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 20, 123, 146, 147, 149, 150, 158

- God 1, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 17, 18, 19, 20, 25, 26, 28, 32, 34, 35, 38, 42, 43, 54, 55, 58, 59, 60, 61, 63, 64, 65, 67, 72, 73, 79, 80, 91, 92, 93, 95, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 115, 116, 130, 131, 133, 134, 136, 137, 139, 140, 141, 143, 150, 152, 153, 157, 160, 168, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174
- Guide of the Perplexed 2, 3, 4, 6, 14, 16, 17, 41, 66, 83, 94, 113, 130, 132, 150, 174
- Halakhah 64, 107, 108, 109, 111, 112, 114, 115, 121, 128
- Halevy, Juda 113
- Hen, Zerahia 123
- Hippasus of Metapontum 174
- Ibn Daud, Abraham 50, 109
- Ibn Ezra, Abraham 36, 111, 113, 149
- Ibn Paquda, Bahya 28
- Ibn Tibbon, Moshe 4, 10, 89, 121
- Ibn Tibbon, Samuel 9, 15, 17, 76, 95, 98, 118, 119, 123, 135, 138, 147
- ‘ilm yaqīnī* 87, 89, 98
- Infinity 47, 167, 172
- Isnād 111, 112, 127
- Jewish Averroism 130
- Joan I, King of Aragon 167
- Joseph ben Judah, ibn Simeon 174
- Judaism 5, 14, 19, 24, 32, 33, 35, 36, 108, 130, 132, 137, 138, 173
- Kalām 63, 104
- Kimhi, David 116, 119
- Kukkonen, Taneli 86
- Kuzari 2, 14, 24, 25, 27, 28, 32, 35, 36, 37, 38, 49
- Lagerlund, Henrik 86
- Letter against Astrology* 89, 93, 94
- Letter to the Sages of Montpellier* 89
- Light of the Lord* 14, 171, 172, 173
- Limitations of knowledge 2, 96
- Logic 2, 5, 24, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 36, 37, 38, 87, 110, 118, 153, 160
- Love 45, 54, 55, 64, 146, 147, 148, 165
- Maimonides 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 10, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 29, 30, 34, 41, 52, 67, 68, 69, 71, 76, 77, 81, 82, 86, 97, 107, 109, 111, 130, 132, 133, 138, 143, 150, 167
- Material intellect 5, 47, 48
- Ma’aseh Bere’shit* 113, 114
- Ma’aseh Merkavah* 114, 127
- Metaphysics* 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 12, 15, 16, 18, 32, 41, 45, 52, 66, 89, 120, 146, 152, 154, 155, 156, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 163, 164, 165, 170
- Middot, Thirteen 109, 110, 111
- Midrash 6, 75, 150, 167, 168, 169
- Mishneh Torah (*Code of Law*) 4, 64, 82, 89, 91, 102, 108, 109, 120, 130, 132, 134, 135, 136, 137
- Moses 20, 26, 33, 98, 105, 109, 133, 146, 170
- Mu’tazila 97
- Noah 26, 33
- Parables 3, 4, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 113, 114, 116, 127
- Pardes* 49, 50
- Particularization 92, 93
- Passion 3, 45, 47, 49, 52, 54, 57, 59, 64, 65, 66, 83
- Perceptions 29, 31, 33, 36, 61
- Perfection 8, 9, 52, 55, 57, 58, 67, 104, 105, 146
- Perpetual Creation (*ḥidush nīẓḥī*) 130, 137, 138, 139, 141
- Persuasion 30, 31, 37
- Physics* 5, 6, 7, 14, 32, 47, 49, 89, 120, 132, 148, 160, 161, 163, 164, 165, 170
- Plato 1, 5, 53, 133, 134, 135, 147, 164
- Politics, political motive 53, 58, 59, 62, 63
- Polqar, Isaac 4, 5, 130, 135, 136, 138, 139, 141, 143
- Posterior Analytics 87, 91
- Premises 18, 29, 30, 31, 33, 34, 90, 91, 99, 104, 110, 160, 172, 173
- Proofs of God, physical and metaphysical 10, 19, 62, 64, 116, 167, 173
- Prophecy 6, 19, 26, 33, 42, 57, 61, 67, 96, 101, 103, 132, 133, 134, 171, 172
- Prophetology 124, 125, 126
- Ptolemy 151, 174
- Pythagoreans 174

Qiyās 111

Rationalism 3, 41, 43, 62, 65, 143

Reason 1, 2, 7, 11, 12, 13, 14, 18, 25, 26, 27,
33, 34, 35, 41, 67, 70, 72, 77, 80, 81,
82, 83, 92, 94, 114, 137, 142, 164,
172

“Remoteness”-consideration 90, 91, 92, 93

Revelation 2, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 20, 23, 41, 55, 67,
124, 125

Scepticism 1, 2, 6, 12, 13, 16, 18, 23, 86, 107,
167, 172, 174

– exoteric vs. esoteric 174

Sensory perception 5, 44, 48, 157, 161

Separate Intellects 19, 66, 98

Sexuality 3, 54, 56, 65

Spinoza 14, 116, 126, 173

Spiritual exercise 122, 123, 127

Strauss, Leo 15, 17, 35, 71, 119

Syllogism 1, 28, 29, 30, 31, 110, 137

ta’wīl 113, 116

Tiqqun De’ot ha-Philosophim [rectifying
the opinions of the philosophers] 136, 138

Torah 46, 57, 67, 83, 89, 90, 92, 101, 113, 114,
132, 136, 137, 141, 151

Tradition 3, 9, 14, 26, 29, 30, 32, 33, 34, 37,
49, 52, 101, 103, 112, 114, 125, 126, 134

uṣūl al-fiqh 110

Violant de Bar, Queen of Aragon 167

Wolfson, Harry Austryn 97, 167

World, eternity of 12, 26, 32, 34, 67, 95, 130,
131, 132, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138

– creation of 7, 134

